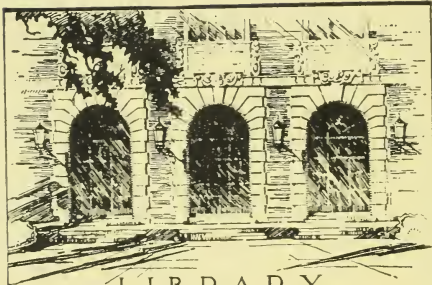


LONG ODDS

HAWLEY SMART





LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823
Sm22
v.2

The person charging this material is responsible for its return to the library from which it was withdrawn on or before the **Latest Date** stamped below.

Theft, mutilation, and underlining of books are reasons for disciplinary action and may result in dismissal from the University.

To renew call Telephone Center, 333-8400

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

JUN 22 1961

MAR 05 2007

L161—O-1096



LONG ODDS.

EDINBURGH ;
COLSTON AND COMPANY
PRINTERS.

LONG ODDS.

A NOVEL.

BY
HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF
'BREEZIE LANGTON,' 'A FALSE START,' 'CLEVERLY WON,'
'THE OUTSIDER,' 'THE MASTER OF RATHKELLY,'
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
F. V. WHITE & CO.,
31 SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND, W.C.

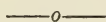
1889.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

823
Small
v. 2

CONTENTS.



CHAP.	PAGE
I.—WHAT NEWMARKET DID FOR THEM, .	1
II.—ABU KLEA AND ABU KRU, . . .	15
III.—LOST IN THE DESERT, . . .	30
IV.—TURF TACTICS, . . .	46
V.—‘I’LL MAKE LOVE TO ONE,’ . . .	60
VI.—ANOTHER BID FOR DAMOCLES, . .	75
VII.—FRONT DE BŒUF, . . .	90
VIII.—FRONT DE BŒUF’S LITTLE BILL, .	107
IX.—‘I SHALL NEVER FORGET YOU, ZELNÈ,’	122
X.—REPORTED MISSING, . . .	137
XI.—‘WHAT NONSENSE YOU TALK,’ . .	151
XII.—MR NOEL LAYS LONG ODDS, . .	166
XIII.—LORD DARTREE’S MISTAKE, . .	181
XIV.—ENGLISH HORSES <i>VERSUS</i> ARABS, .	196
XV.—‘THE MUMMER,’ . . .	210
XVI.—CHAFFED INTO A MATCH, . . .	224

LONG ODDS.

POPULAR NEW NOVELS.

Now ready, in One Vol., the Seventh Edition of

ARMY SOCIETY; or Life in a Garrison Town. By JOHN STRANGE
WINTER. Author of 'Bootles' Baby.' Cloth gilt, 6s. ; also, picture boards, 2s.

Also now ready, in cloth gilt, 3s. 6d. each.

GARRISON GOSSIP, Gathered in Blankhampton. By JOHN STRANGE
WINTER. Also picture boards, 2s.

A SIEGE BABY. By the same Author.

IN THE SHIRES. By Sir RANDAL H. ROBERTS, Bart.

THE GIRL IN THE BROWN HABIT. A Sporting Novel. By Mrs EDWARD
KENNARD. Also picture boards, 2s.

BY WOMAN'S WIT. By Mrs ALEXANDER. Author of 'The Wooing O't.' Also,
picture boards, 2s.

MONA'S CHOICE. By the same Author.

KILLED IN THE OPEN. By Mrs EDWARD KENNARD. Also, picture boards, 2s.

IN A GRASS COUNTRY. By Mrs H. LOVETT-CAMERON. Also, picture
boards, 2s.

A DEVOUT LOVER. By the same Author.

THE OUTSIDER. By HAWLEY SMART. Also, picture boards 2s.

STRAIGHT AS A DIE. By EDWARD KENNARD. Also. picture boards, 2s.

TWILIGHT TALES. By the same Author. *Illustrated.*

SHE CAME BETWEEN. By Mrs ALEXANDER FRASER.

THE CRUSADE OF 'THE EXCELSIOR.' By BRET HARTE.

CURB AND SNAFFLE. By Sir RANDAL H. ROBERTS, Bart.

A REAL GOOD THING. By Mrs EDWARD KENNARD.

DREAM FACES. By the Hon. Mrs FETHERSTONHAUGH.

F. V. WHITE & Co., 31 Southampton Street, Strand,
London, W.C.

LONG ODDS.

ERRATA.

VOL. II.

Page 16, line 4, for 'would hold,' read '*will* hold.'

„ 17, „ 11, for 'That the limit of time,' &c., &c., read 'That the limit of time to which Gordon *has* alleged his ability to hold out *is* rapidly drawing to a close the chiefs of the expedition are painfully aware. That it will be a very close thing, march rapidly as they may, *is* perfectly clear, and that should success crown the toils of the column, it will only be by a very narrow margin *is* certain.'

„ 17, line 22, for 'showed,' read 'shows.'

„ 84, „ 20, for 'bid,' read '*bit*.'

„ 149, „ 15, for 'and that I am,' &c., read '*and I am*,' &c.

„ 161, „ 16, for 'to look at it,' read '*to hear* it.'

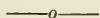
saunders won very seldom, and that when they did, they were as a rule as unbacked as their prototype at the roulette board. He was sauntering at the post office one

POPULAR NEW NOVELS.

Now ready, in One Vol., the Seventh Edition of

ARMY SOCIETY; or Life in a Garrison Town. By JOHN STRANGE
Author of 'Bootles' Baby.' Cloth gilt, 6s. ; also, picture boards, 2s.

LONG ODDS.



CHAPTER I.

WHAT NEWMARKET DID FOR THEM.

YOUNG Tom Robbins had after his wont still further decreased his store during the July meeting. Weak in judgment, he was always pursuing that *ignis fatuus* of backers—the backing of something at long odds so as to win a handsome stake at once, although experience might have taught him that, like the zero at roulette, these outsiders won very seldom, and that when they did, they were as a rule as unbacked as their prototype at the roulette board. He was sauntering at the post office one

morning, having despatched his usual telegram concerning the morning gallops to the paper he was employed on, when he ran across Mr Napper.

‘Ah! Tom, my boy,’ said that gentleman, ‘how goes it? Anything new on the Heath this morning?’

‘No,’ replied the other; ‘nothing has broke down that I’ve heard of. There was a trial of some kind on the Bury side, but I couldn’t make anything out of it. What are you up to?’

‘Well, I’m off to town,’ replied Mr Napper. ‘There’s a matter of business that a London firm is working for us, and they’ve sent down for fuller information, and as I am well up in the case, my employers thought the best thing they could do was to send me up to talk it over with them, and I’ve just wired to say I’m on my way. I say, did you ever have a look at your father’s will?’

‘No,’ replied Tom; ‘it hardly seemed good enough to go to town about.’

‘Well, I don’t know that it is,’ replied

Mr Napper, 'but, as I said to you before, I consider it is worth paying a shilling to see. Stop, I'll tell you what I'll do. I shall have a little time to spare. I'll go and see it for you if you like.'

'I wish you would, like a good fellow,' replied Tom Robbins.

'All right, old chappie. I'll look up the old 'un's last testament, never fear; and now I'm off. By-by.'

Mr Napper was a very astute, crafty young gentleman—one of those young gentlemen who, as the saying goes, are 'quite too clever to live.' Quite too sharp to last is a better rendering of it, for such men, by their extreme scepticism with regard to their neighbours, are apt to overreach themselves. He was a pushing, active, energetic little fellow, anxious to come by money, honestly if he could, but, above all, to come by money. To his clerkship in the solicitor's office at Newmarket he added the post of special agent there for his uncle, Mr James Noel. To have said that he was James Noel's tout

would have made him very indignant, but for all that he was only a high development of this order as regards his uncle. He had not the time, nor would it have suited with his other position that he should have been amongst the ordinary gang of horse-watchers, but for all that there was no important trial took place at Newmarket that Mr Napper was not acquainted with the results pretty well as soon as the touts—usually more accurately informed than many of them, such as Tom Robbins, to wit. Mr Noel was no niggard of his gold when useful information was brought to him, and this enabled Sim Napper to be liberal, and as Sim's speculations were usually of a very modest character, the horse-watchers thought there could be no harm in what they told him; and, what was still more to the point, some of the stable boys were equally communicative, with a due regard to the five shillings which rewarded any little bit of equine scandal deemed worthy of note.

In the course of the day Sim Napper found time to call at Somerset House, and examine the will of the late Richard Bramton, and he was not a little astonished upon mastering its contents.

‘Well,’ he muttered to himself, ‘you were quite right, Tom; it wasn’t worth your while coming up to London to look at it. It don’t benefit you, nor can I see it will be ever likely to, even if you could lay hands on your mother’s marriage certificate; but we are all out of it, too. John Bramton, apparently, hasn’t come into a shilling. It all goes to the young woman. She is worth picking up. Somebody told me the Miss Bramtons were very pretty girls. Now that codicil, I wonder whether there’s anything to be done with that? Let’s look at it again.’

“By my said will I have left all my racehorses to my niece Lucy Bramton; and whereas some of these may be engaged in important stakes, and others untried at my death, and so their value

not known, I therefore think they ought to be kept in training for a year or two ; and I now authorise executors of this my will, during the minority of my said niece Lucy, to carry on the training of such horses, paying the cost of the same out of the annual income of my estate.

‘ “ Signed, sealed, and delivered,” etc.

‘ Now, this is a bit of information that might be useful to my Uncle Jim. I can’t say I see exactly how, but that’s his business. There is one thing pretty clear, that all this talk about Mr Bramton selling Damocles is moonshine. I don’t believe he can, according to this. At all events, I should say he can’t sell him this year. It would raise a beautiful point if it was ever in dispute.’

From Somerset House Mr Napper went across to the Victoria Club, and called upon his uncle, James Noel. He found the bootmaker in, and over the lunch which the latter proffered, told him of his recent discovery.

‘No; you’re right, Sim,’ said Mr Noel. ‘I don’t see much to be made out of it; but it’s curious the first favourite for the Derby being the property of a lady. As you say, it does away with all these reports about Damocles being for sale. You may be pretty certain that he won’t leave his present stable.’

Leaving Mr Noel to cogitate on the information Mr Napper had brought him, we must now turn round and see what came of the July week to some of the other people in this veracious narrative. The Bramtons were one and all delighted with their first experience of racing. It had been, indeed, a very pleasant day’s outing as far as they were concerned. They had carried off the big prize of the day, and Mr Bramton, thanks to the Earl of Ranksborow, had attracted some little attention. The Earl had introduced him to several young men, prefacing his introduction with the aside, ‘Has got the two prettiest daughters and the best glass

of champagne on the Heath. If he asks you to lunch, go.'

Mr Bramton was the soul of hospitality, and the consequence was his daughters had quite a little court of young men, who thought there was no pleasanter way of repaying hospitality than by flirting with the young ladies; and though Lucy seemed somewhat absorbed in Alec Flood, yet Matilda showed herself quite equal to the occasion, and coquetted gaily with her sister's as well as her own admirers. Mr Bramton, indeed, was exceedingly pleased with his *début* on the turf. Not only had he thoroughly enjoyed himself, but so far it was a very money-making business to boot. The whole party, indeed, left Newmarket extremely well satisfied with themselves. True Mr Bramton, figuring in the position of owning the winner of the Julys, fell into divers mistakes in attempting to show Damocles to his new acquaintance—pointing out as Damocles various horses that were not the least like him, except, perhaps, in

the matter of colour. Mr Bramton found it very difficult to distinguish one race-horse from another ; but with all his elation, he was too shrewd a man to pledge himself to Lord Ranksborow, and parried that nobleman's craftily-worded request very cleverly. The Earl had said to him, in airy fashion, after the Julys,—

‘ Now, Bramton, make our minds easy ; all Barkshire, like myself, is on your horse for next year's Derby. Promise us one thing, that you won't sell him.’

‘ Oh ! I couldn't do that. It ain't business, you know. You're bound to realise, you know, when things touch the top of the market. It's a great sport no doubt, my lord, but I don't know that it is altogether prudent to keep so much capital locked up in what is very perishable property.’

It was no use. Try as he might, the Earl could get no positive assurance from John Bramton that he would not part with the horse. On the contrary,

he was apparently inclined to do so should he be offered an outside price for him, and that Bramton had arrived at a much clearer idea of the value of Damocles than when Mr Skinner first endeavoured to buy him, was manifest. Now the Earl knew perfectly well that there were some three or four wealthy young men who had just appeared on the turf, and who would be quite willing to spend a lot of money in the hope of winning their first Derby. He discerned that it was hopeless to arouse any ambition of that sort in the owner of Damocles ; and the consequence was that he lived in daily dread of hearing that noble animal had changed hands. He had great confidence in Stubber as far as he went, he thoroughly believed in his ability and honesty ; the only doubt he had, was he able to cope with such an unscrupulous practitioner as James Noel Lord Ranksborow had been far too long on the turf to think that those connected with it were of necessity scoundrels, but of course these exist, as they do in all other vocations.

Nothing definite had ever been alleged against James Noel, but it certainly was curious that horses he laid heavily against were very liable to mishaps, and from the outset he had been a most persistent opposer of Damocles for the Epsom race.

Lucy had so far, on one occasion only, had to remind her father of the existence of the codicil, and had never shown him the opinion Mr Pecker had obtained upon it. John Bramton from the first had pooh-poohed the paragraph. He considered it merely expressed a wish ; in fact it was more a guide for himself as trustee than anything else. His brother, knowing that he had no knowledge of the value of racing stock, was simply anxious that his horses should not be sold for about half what they were worth ; but so long as his daughter was a minor, he conceived that he had the power to do as he thought best about the disposal of the stud. Lawyers always did make such a fuss about things. As Pecker had said, the question was hardly likely to arise, as Miss

Lucy would doubtless be guided by her father in such a matter. True she had opposed the sale of Damocles to Lord Ranksborow, but then the result had justified the opposition, and went to show that Lucy at that time, thanks to her late uncle's instructions, was a better judge of the value of thorough-bred stock than he was, but that she would ever seriously oppose what he thought right to do never entered his head.

John Bramton had gone through two or three different phases of thought on the subject of his brother's stud. His first impulse had been to sell them all ; then came the stage of great misgivings, when he first discovered that the horses were so very much more valuable than he had deemed them ; then came the distinction of being the supposed owner of a racing crack, which suited a fussy, pompous man like himself exactly ; then, again, came the old trading instinct, which told him it was absurd to keep ten thousand pounds locked up in the form of a horse, and he was told

that Damocles was worth that at the present moment. It was useless pointing out to him that the horse would probably win as much as that before he was a year older. That, in Bramton's eyes, was sheer gambling—it might or might not be so; he might fall a victim to any of the ills that horse-flesh is heir to; he might be beaten, and thus decrease in value. Nobody had offered him ten thousand pounds for Damocles as yet, and although John Bramton was not quite prepared to accept such an offer right off, he was certainly quite prepared to think it over; and I fancy most prudent men would say that he was right. Lucy, on the other hand, had in the first instance been influenced simply by a desire to comply with her uncle's last wish. She would have said, 'Do what you like with the rest, but let me keep Damocles;' but now that she had tasted all the *éclat* of being a successful owner of racehorses, she was by no means disposed to abandon the position. She was so delighted with the glories of

the July week that, had it not been too late, she would have expostulated with her father about the sale of the other horses. As it was, she was determined strenuously to oppose any idea of parting with those that remained. It was true that the world regarded Damocles as the property of her father, but that did not signify. She as her father's daughter got quite her share of the honour and glory, and she was firmly convinced that racing in fine weather was the perfection of sports ; and, moreover, the girl did take, what none of the rest of the family did, a genuine interest in the sport *itself*.

CHAPTER II.

ABU KLEA AND ABU KRU.

THE low growlings of the country have at length deepened to a roar, and the Government no longer dare vacillate about making one supreme effort to save the soldier whom they had hitherto left to his fate in Khartoum. Precious time had been lost, but what has been aptly termed the 'Campaign of the Cataracts,' had at length begun. By day and night the procession of boats swept by, bearing the miscellaneous force who were straining every nerve to reach the leaguered city wherein,

'Like a roebuck at bay,
Flouts our GREAT SOLDIER the Moslem array.'

Closely beset though Gordon is, despatches are yet occasionally received from him, which mention with quiet decision how long his food would hold out, and at the same time state with equal directness that to escape is now impossible, and that, his provisions once exhausted, there is nothing left him but to die sword in hand.

‘And leaving in battle no blot on his name,
Look proudly to heaven, from his deathbed of fame.’

Night and day the boats struggle on up the famous river, rowing, sailing, tugging, amidst the laughter, cries, and, I am afraid, occasionally curses, of the soldiers, voyageurs, and natives, tumbling up cataracts, goodness knows how, sometimes turning over, and still somehow, a great mass of men and material, makes its way up the old mysterious stream to the rendezvous of Korti. Not a man of them all but knows that they have much hardship, hard fare, and hard fighting before they see the walls of Khartoum ;

but what reck they of that? The sole thought in all men's mind is, 'Shall we be in time?' Hard work it has been to reach Korti, and everybody knows now that Lord Wolseley has decided upon the daring expedient of a dash across the desert, from that point. Still there is much to be done before Sir Herbert Stewart's force is sufficiently victualled and organised to proceed on its way. That the limit of time to which Gordon had alleged his ability to hold out was rapidly drawing to a close, the chiefs of the expedition are painfully aware. That it will be a very close thing, march rapidly as they may, was perfectly clear, and that, should success crown the toils of the column, it would only be by a very narrow margin, was certain. That the Arabs should have allowed the Wells of Jakdul to be seized upon without resistance, showed a supineness on their part so contrary to the energy and activity they had displayed in the neighbourhood of Suakim, as to astonish our leaders not a

little. Subsequent events showed that they were probably taken by surprise, and were far from expecting a relieving force to advance from that direction ; but as soon as they did understand it, that we were not to have a peaceful promenade to Metammeh, they gave speedy and vigorous proof. However, all is ready at last ; another hour, and Sir Herbert Stewart and his soldiers will plunge into the desert.

Standing at the door of one of the tents, and looking, with a mingled expression of disgust and amusement on his face, at the stubborn vagaries of a contumacious camel, stands Jack Cuxwold. If he had made rather light of the Egyptian campaign when we last saw him, at Cairo, he had seen his predictions fulfilled, and enough stern and bitter fighting since then to satisfy most men. He, like his comrades, had carried his life in his hand many a time, in that ceaseless battling with the irrepressible Osman Digma, in the scrub round Suakim. His tall figure looked

somewhat leaner that when we last saw it, and his face is burnt by the desert sun to a red brick colour. A puggaree is wound round his pith helmet ; and he wears a sort of grey Norfolk jacket, with collar *à la guillotine* ; high boots ; and a waist-belt, from which hang his revolver and sabre, complete his attire. But the man looks all wire and whipcord, and, if somewhat thinner, apparently none the worse for his campaigning, so far.

‘Well, we never know what we may come to,’ he mutters. ‘When I joined the 24th Lancers, I certainly never dreamt of riding a brute like that ; and a more obstinate, pig-headed devil, or one more uncomfortable to ride, I don’t suppose exists on the face of the globe. A mule ! why, a mule is a park hack compared to him. I should just like to give Dart a mount on one. He can ride a bit, and thinks he can ride a good bit more ; but I think he’d own a camel was hard to hold, when it came to a difference of opinion with his rider. Well ! we shouldn’t like

to have been left out of it, though it is rather rough to send a smart Lancer regiment into the desert, mounted on beasts like that, their one redeeming quality being a capacity of going without water four or five days.'

Ugly and obstinate the ship of the desert may be, but of a verity the campaign of the Soudan made a very hecatomb of his race.

Covered by a small body of horsemen, the long column winds its weary way across the desert, until it arrived at the Wells of Jakdul. No sign of the Arabs as yet, but, for all that, the leaders in the expedition relax no whit in their vigilance. Soon after leaving the Wells, the horsemen scouting in front report the presence of small parties of Arabs, apparently watching their advance. Warily the column presses forward, and soon the dragoons gallop back from the front, and report large masses of the enemy moving in the scrub. Still pushing forward—ever onward, for every man in that

.

force knows that the hours are precious, the soldiers toil on under the blazing sun, and eke out their limited supply of water as best they may. Then comes the news that the Arabs are massing in their front; the column halts, forms up, and, after a little, once more advances in an *echelon* of squares. They are not left much longer in doubt about the enemy's proceedings. Already the horsemen covering the advance have ridden in; a few minutes more, and the scrub becomes alive with the Arab host, who came on like a tidal wave, surging, shrieking, and brandishing their spears. Down go the deadly breechloaders, and as, in response to the bugle call, the withering roll of musketry commences, the daring fanatics fall in scores, and their spirits are wafted to that Paradise where they imagine the dark-eyed houris are awaiting them. As the wave recoils from the rock-bound coast, so the Arabs recoil from the stubborn, impenetrable squares of the British infantry. Bayonets

are red, and swords drip blood, but still the dauntless Moslems, like the ocean surf repelled—like that ocean surf return again and again to the charge. Many of England's best and bravest are down, with their life-blood drenching the desert sands, and amongst them poor Fred Burnaby, as gallant a soldier as ever died a warrior's death. But the onslaught gets slacker and slacker, and at last the Arabs sullenly retire from their hopeless efforts to break those obstinate squares, leaving the ground around them strewn with the dead and dying.

The battle is over, and the conquerors are now left to count the cost of their hard-earned victory. The leaders look with grim dismay at the gaps in the ranks of their little band. They have still far to go, and they are likely to have much more such fighting before they once more strike the waters of the Nile; but their triumph has given them the Wells of Abu Klea.

They are but a handful to accomplish

this task, and yet it would have been scarce possible to have carried water for a larger number. Jack Cuxwold, black with powder but all unhurt, looks grimly down at a lithe, powerful young Arab, whose shade his sabre has sent to the realms of bliss.

‘A real good-plucked one,’ he muttered, as he gazed upon the fine wild dark features of his fallen foe, who, reckless of life, had fought his way into the square. ‘Well, they all are ; they fight like wild cats.’ And then, sad to say, the Honourable Jack’s thoughts assume a more material form, and, turning to one of his brother officers, he remarked,—

‘It was pretty hot while it lasted, Checquers. I don’t know how you feel, but I’d give a tenner for a pot of beer!’

‘Yes, it was pretty lively,’ observed the young gentleman addressed. ‘Yes, Jack, it will be a subject of life-long regret to think of that magnificent thirst that we enjoyed in the Soudan, and which had to remain ungratified. I’ve been only

able to allow myself two mouthfuls of water to take the dust out of my mouth after that "little kickup."'

'Yes,' replied Jack, 'and, after all, we've only won the first round, and not the fight. We have given those fellows a terrible dusting, but they take their punishment like men, and will have another shy at us before we reach Metammeh.'

On the column moves again, slowly making its toilsome way, now over the sandy ridges, now through the low scrub, men perspiring, camels grunting, and anxious inquiries passing from mouth to mouth as to how long it will be before they reach the next wells. Misers there are who dole out the drops from their water-bottles a teaspoonful at a time, spendthrifts who have long ago emptied theirs, and who are fain to chew bullets, stones, or bits of the dry scrub, to produce saliva and allay the fierce thirst that possesses them. The scouts ever and anon report that the Arabs in small parties are watching their movements

closely. Once more water is reached, there is a halt of some hours, and then the march is once more resumed. A long tedious night tramp, with dire misgivings that the guides have either lost their way or are purposely misleading them. Once more the order is given to halt, the zareba is formed, and preparation is made for the night. The scouts report that the Arabs are gathering thick in their front. They surely cannot be far from the river now. Ah! it is plain. The enemy has intercepted them, and intends to make them fight once more before they get to the water. It is the battle of the other day over again. Once more, led on by their sheikhs, who are chanting texts from the Koran, with loud cries, the Arabs come dauntlessly on. Once more rings out the ceaseless fire of the breechloader, and the deep growlings of the Gatling. The Moslems charge home with all the reckless contempt of death characteristic of their creed, and strew the ground like autumn leaves, while many of them are

killed at the very edge of the square, and some few of them even inside.

But the leaden hail tells at last, the fierce rushes get weaker and weaker, and finally the enemy retires sullenly, bearing with him as many as he can of his wounded. Victors once more, but, alack ! at a terrible price. Stewart, their gallant leader, is severely wounded, destined, sad to say, never to recover from his injuries. And many another good man and true reck little now as to whether Khartoum is reached in time or no ; many of them, perchance, aware by this that their efforts have been all in vain. A consultation takes place between the chiefs of the expedition, and it is determined that the wounded, under a strong guard, shall be left in the zareba, and the remainder of the force shall fight its way to the river. On they push, the Arabs firing sullenly at them from the scrub. But the fight is out of the foe. He no longer charges in his old dashing fashion up to the very face of the square, and as the breech-

loaders search the scrub, he flies from his cover to a safer distance.

At last the river lies glittering before them, and, camping on its banks, they prepare to indulge in the luxury of water unlimited. Gordon's steamers are there, and the men in charge of them protest that Khartoum still holds out. All will be known now in a very few hours. Sir Robert Wilson, Lord Charles Beresford, and a handful of soldiers and sailors are to embark in those steamers at daybreak the next morning. In the meantime, the sick, wounded in hospitals, and baggage, have all been brought from the zareba down to the encampment on the river's bank, and now it became necessary to send back a messenger with despatches to the Commander-in-chief, informing him of their having gained the river,—of Gordon's reported safety, to say nothing of that dread list of killed and wounded that always accompanies the news of victories; and the man selected for this purpose was Jack Cuxwold. He was pro-

vided with a picked dromedary, and he was to take an ample supply of food and water. It was not anticipated that he would meet any Arabs on his way back to Korti, but of course he might come across a wandering party. Still, so far as they knew, he ran no more risk than such a messenger might expect to encounter. Jack cursed his luck. At first it seemed to him nothing but a long, dreary, and solitary ride. He was a man of gregarious habits, and did not at all appreciate campaigning by himself. Still, in the old campaigning phrase, 'It was all in the day's work;' he had got the order, and the thing had got to be done.

'Don't pity you a bit, Jack,' remarked young Checquers. 'It'll give you a grand time for mental reflection, and a splendid opportunity to think over the errors of your career; besides, if you can't tell his lordship what gallant service you've rendered in the recent battles, who can, I should like to know? I only wish I had such a chance to hold forth on my own merits.'

‘ Oh, don’t be a fool, Checquers,’ was the curt rejoinder.

‘ No, this child ain’t much of one,’ was the reply ; ‘ but, joking apart, Jack, don’t you know that the bearers of despatches generally get something out of it ? The chances are you will too, old man.’

Cuxwold brightened up at this, and at once commenced his few preparations for departure.

CHAPTER III.

LOST IN THE DESERT.

A COUPLE of hours later, and Jack Cuxwold, having received his despatches, mounts his dromedary, and once more strikes across the Nubian desert. He is accompanied by Checquers, who, mounted on a camel, proposes to see him fairly on his way.

‘Well, they’ve done the handsome thing for you,’ observed that young gentleman, ‘and picked you out one of the thorough-bred ones. Those dromedaries can go a rare pace when they’re put to it; not like this lumbering old brute of mine. The only thing I fancy is that they jolt you pretty well all to pieces, when you put ’em into a trot.’

‘Fancy they do,’ replied Jack; ‘and, as my orders are to lose no time on the way,

I shall doubtless be pretty well bumped to pieces before I reach Korti.'

'Well, old fellow, it'll be a pretty dull ride; but you'll have a chat at the Wells of Jakdul with the people we've left there. As for us, I suppose you'll find us in Khartoum when you get back.'

'I don't think so,' said Jack. 'Whether we've been in time to save Gordon or not we don't yet know; but we can't do more than bring him off. We can't maintain ourselves at Khartoum, on account of our want of supplies.'

'Right you are,' said Checquers. 'I never thought of that. I suppose we shall have to tramp our way back across this blessed old sea of sand, with our Arab friends making it as lively for us as ever.'

'Quite likely. Now I think you had better turn back. I'm going to push on, and, I take it, you won't be able to keep up with this dromedary. I'm told he can really go a good pace, and keep it up.'

'Yes,' replied Checquers. 'I know that fellow by sight. He is the best thing

in the camel line we've got amongst us. They tell me, over a distance, that breed will wear down any horse.'

'True,' said Jack; 'and one great pull is that, going fast, these fellows make such good time between the wells, that you don't require to carry much water.'

'Well, good-bye, and God bless you!' exclaimed the other; 'hope you'll have a pleasant ride,' and, with a hearty hand-grip, the two men separated.

Checquers looked after his friend for a few minutes, but Cuxwold put his dromedary to its speed, and the animal at once broke into the long shambling run peculiar to his race, which, if not graceful to look at, nevertheless carries them over the ground at a considerable rate, and Jack soon became a mere shadow in the distance.

'Hope he'll pull through all right,' muttered Checquers to himself. 'I shall feel awful bad if my captain leaves his bones in the desert. He is much too good a fellow for that; and, of course, there's always the chance of his falling in

with a small band of Arabs—beggars who would cut his throat for fun, let alone to become the possessors of that dromedary ;' and thus ruminating, Mr Checquers, keeping his ' eyes pretty well skinned,' to use his own expression, made the best of his way back to camp.

It was night ; the heavens were gemmed in all their jewellery ; the moon, though not yet fairly risen, cast its soft light over the shadowless desert, as Jack Cuxwold sped onward on his way. If ever a man would think, it would be upon such a solitary ride as this. The time, the mighty silence, the great sandy waste, and, above all, the stirring scenes in which his life had been lately passed, all combined to make Cuxwold look back upon his past life not a little seriously. What a time it seemed since he had left England ! and yet it was not such a very long time ago either. Between two and three years, that was all. He thought of them all at Knightshayes, and wondered what they were all doing.

Dartree was not much of a correspondent : the last letter he had from him he was full of his steeplechases. He wondered how he was getting on with them. It was the winter season now—just the time for them, and the hunting. How he should like a good gallop with the West Barkshire. And then he thought of the luxury of bestriding a thoroughbred horse, in lieu of this rough-going ‘ship of the desert’ that he was at present riding. He wondered what sort of a year his father and brother had had racing. Really, the most news he had had about his own family, was contained in a letter from Flood. In it he had reminded him of the scene in the gambling-house at Cairo,—of Dick Bramton’s last message to his niece, ‘to take care of Damocles.’ ‘It is a curious thing,’ wrote Flood, ‘that I happened to be at Newmarket, and saw that distinguished animal win the Julys. I further made the acquaintance of all the Bramton family, including, of course, our *protégée* of Cairo, who asked a good deal

about you. It seems your noble father and Dartree have backed Damocles, at long odds, for next year's Derby. The Earl, indeed, stands to win an immense stake on him. The poor fellow we saw killed at Cairo was rather a racing pal of Lord Ranksborow's, and he's in agonies now as to what John Bramton means to do with that colt. John Bramton, you must know, has bought Temple Rising, and, so to speak, established himself at the doors of Knightshayes. He seems a good-tempered, hospitable old vulgarian, and though he may know nothing about racing, your father told me he was a very sharp man of business, and that he thought nobody would get the best of him, either on the turf or anywhere else.'

The letter then went on with sundry inquiries as to whether there was any chance of their speedily finishing up the Soudan campaign, which, as we are already in possession of Mr Flood's views respecting that embroglio, it is not necessary to particularise.

Jack Cuxwold thought a good deal over this letter, as he rode on. So that pretty girl with the golden-red hair and blue eyes hadn't quite forgotten him. He thought of that one letter he had received from her; and to think she was established at Temple Rising. Of course, he knew the place well; he had been often there, in the days when it belonged to his father's friend, poor old Molyneux. 'By Jove!' he thought, 'it ought to be a warning to the governor. He and Dart have a weakness for plunging, and between 'em, if they don't mind, they'll bring Knightshayes to the hammer. Of course, it can't personally be of much importance to me; but I'm fond of the old place. I should be awfully cut up to see it go out of the family. It's an awful business to think of Temple Rising going away from the Molyneuxs. Alec don't give a very flattering account of their successors; but Lucy, the one that was at Cairo, was as pretty, ladylike a girl as ever I met.

Jack, who had been travelling for some

hours, now thought it advisable to halt for a little, and refresh both himself and his beast ; and here he made two discoveries, which scattered his reflections to the winds. The first of these was, that the large goat-skin which had contained his water, leaked, and that it was now well-nigh exhausted. True, he had his water-bottle, but that was a marvellously short supply upon which to rely until he reached the Abu Klea Wells. The second discovery—hardly to be called a discovery indeed, as yet—was the dread suspicion that he had somehow missed his way. Once get off the route, and it is as easy to lose your way in the desert as to lose your reckoning on the ocean. You are at once placed in the position of men who have abandoned their ship, and taken to their boats. You know not how long you may wander about before help comes to you, but you do know that your food and water will only last so long, and that if help come not to you within that time, or thereabouts, you will be past praying

for. The bones of men and beasts have blanched before now on the desert sands, simply because they were out in their reckoning. To these lost ones it had come that they must reach water or perish, and they had perished.

Jack had heard plenty of such stories. Few people that have ever crossed the desert but have heard such narratives. The route is, of course, well-known ; but still, get but a mile off the track, and it is very easy to make a serious mistake in your efforts to return to it. Jack might well look grave at the situation. First and foremost, if he did not fail, he would be, at all events, slow in the doing of his errand, and that, in a bearer of despatches, is unpardonable ; secondly, death by thirst was a mode of leaving this world that nobody would willingly select. Jack Cuxwold sat quietly down to think the thing out. Now it so happened that he had a small compass attached to his watch chain, and though perhaps not very reliable, it would, he thought, give him a general

knowledge of his bearings ; but then, the worst of it was, he had a very hazy idea of what his course ought to be, and he was quite conscious that much inaccuracy on this point might cost him his life. However, he was soon mounted on his dromedary, and commenced his endeavours to recover the track.

The moon was by this time fading from the hills ; the stars twinkled like expiring rushlights, and then went out. It was the dark hour before the dawn ; and, as Jack wandered aimlessly along, he felt that he had been foolish,—that it would have been better, both for him and his animal, to have rested until the rising sun had enabled him to take a calm survey of—

‘Those sands, by the seas never shaken,
Nor wet from the washing of tides.’

There was not much to be done till the day dawned ; and when, like a ball of fire, it showed above the distant horizon, Jack Cuxwold was fain to confess that he was lost in the desert. According to his calculation, he should by this have been some-

where in the vicinity of their first fight with the Arabs, and, if that were the case, there would still remain all the *débris* of the fray; and though the vultures, after the manner of the wild dogs, had doubtless

‘Stripped the flesh

As you peel the fig, when the fruit is fresh,’

yet the bleaching skeletons of both men and animals would mark the scene of that fierce encounter; but no, there was not a sign,—nothing but that waste of low scrub and sand. The sun rose higher in the heavens, and again and again did his eyes rove over the pitiless desert, in the hope of recognising some object that might recall to him his whereabouts. Not a rock, not a boulder, nothing could he recognise; there was nothing but that monotonous waste of arid sand or stunted scrub. Swell after swell did he surmount of that dreary plain, but all to no end. More than one sandhill did he ascend, only to see the same prospect on all sides of him. The heat had become intolerable, and his thirst was maddening. He dared not

take a thorough good draught, but was forced to moisten his lips with a few drops from his water-bottle. In vain he pursued the course, which, by his compass, he thought would lead him to Korti; but he was off the track, and could see nothing which he recognised as having passed on his way up. A horse will find his way in the darkness, or when his rider is perfectly unable to do so. If instinct served horses in such straits, why should it not serve camels? He would leave it to the dromedary; but that hapless brute did not apparently rise to the occasion, and, after wandering aimlessly about for a couple of hours, Jack came to the conclusion that whatever might be the case with his race generally, the beast he bestrode was not gifted with intelligence sufficient to succour them in their need.

Suddenly he espied a massive boulder cropping out of the sand. It was some distance off, but he would make for that. He did not expect much from it; it was very little likely that there was a spring in

its neighbourhood; but there was one thing it surely would give, and that was shade. On one side or the other of it there must be some protection from the burning desert sun. His temples throbbed, his lips were parched, but still onwards he toiled. One consolation only was that the patient animal he rode showed no signs of flagging; but how was it all to end? Like the Israelites of old, he was wandering aimlessly in the desert. At length he reached the rock, and, dismounting, took refuge with his dromedary beneath its shadow. He had food, but he had little appetite for it. Water was his great anxiety; and to have lost nearly all his supply in such an untoward manner so soon after starting, was a terrible mischance. Jack Cuxwold had looked death undauntedly in the face several times during the past two years, but then it had been in hot blood. The destroyer had never confronted him in such grisly fashion as now.

Worn out with his ride, Jack hobbled

his dromedary, indulged himself with a penurious draught from that widow's cruse, his water-bottle, and, stretching himself out, was soon wrapped in a profound slumber. The sun was still high in the heavens when he awoke, consumed with feverish thirst. It did not matter, it had to be endured; what little water he had left must be hoarded to the last extremity. After due study of his compass, he once more mounted his beast, and started, not on his way, but to find it. Three or four hours' aimless wandering, and then he espied a small group of rocks which he thought he recognised. The sun was sinking to his bed in the west ere he reached them, only to discover that the hope he had fostered had probably been father to the thought. Like the mirage, they were a deception—no sign of the track was to be seen from under them; and all he could say was that on his way up he had seen something very like them. He could stand it no longer; his thirst was maddening; it was no use preserv-

ing that last modicum of water, and, dismounting, he drained his water-bottle to the dregs, and laid himself down under this fresh group of boulders.

When he awoke about daybreak, the same intolerable thirst possessed him ; his lips were dry ; his tongue felt as if swollen to double its size, and to have become perfectly hard. Jack Cuxwold was no flincher, but a strange terror crept over him now. That he was far from the end of his physical resources he knew. He was tired, weary, and, to a considerable extent, exhausted by his exertions, but still more by the terrible scarcity of water that he had had to endure under a tropical sun ; still, he was a long way off being incapable of exertion. If a good bit beat, there was a good deal of strength left in him still. But the thing that frightened him was that he felt his brain was going. He was conscious that he was getting light-headed, and this, too, at a time when, if ever a man required the full possession of all his faculties, it was he.

That strange jumble of ideas that is wont to surge through a man's brain just before it becomes lost to him, already possessed him. The days of his boyhood were mingled with the strife at Abu Klea, the running of Damocles, the death of Dick Bramton, and the fair face of his niece. He was gradually losing all thought of what he wanted to do, or where he was going. Why didn't Lucy Bramton let Damocles go? What was this hard thing that somebody had put in his mouth, and that he could not get rid of? He attempted to shout but the words would not come, 'Great God! did not Checquers see that tall Arab, spear in hand, who was bounding up on his right? Help him, some of you, or he'll be killed!' And, vainly striving to utter such incoherent cries, Jack Cuxwold fell by the side of the rocks, and relapsed into insensibility.

When he next regained consciousness, his head was on a woman's lap, and it was a woman's hand that held the cup to his blackened lips.

CHAPTER IV.

TURF TACTICS.

WE must now go back in our story some three months, to see what was happening in England. Mr Bramton had already justified Lord Ranksborow's opinion of him, by showing that though he might know nothing about racing, he was about as shrewd a business man as one could come across. He knew perfectly well that in Damocles he possessed a very valuable property. That the colt was the property of his daughter, was a fact that he was apt to forget; not that he in the slightest degree wished to deprive Lucy of one shilling that might accrue to her, but

in all his experience, business affairs had been the prerogative of men. He could not understand a woman interfering in such transactions. He was quite willing to admit that he was only his daughter's steward—and one more alive to her interests no woman need wish to possess; but then John Bramton wished to be a steward of the most autocratic type. He would manage Lucy's affairs to the very best of his ability, but it must be in his own way. Women knew nothing of business; and though Lucy was still an infant in the eye of the law, that made very little difference to John Bramton. Had she been five-and-thirty, as long as she was unmarried, he would have conceived that he had a perfect right to administer her affairs.

He gloried, too, not a little in being the presumed owner of Damocles. To be the proprietor of the crack two-year-old of the season, he found conferred upon him an importance that immensely gratified his vanity. People who would have scarcely

deigned to look at the retired shopkeeper—wholesale though he might have been—were keenly alive to scrape acquaintance with the owner of the favourite for the coming Derby. It is curious, but it is so. Knowing the owner of a crack racehorse, however slightly, in the estimation of some people, seems to betoken the possibility of money-making; because they are acquainted with the owner of Podusokus, they imagine that they are more intimately acquainted with the merits of that noble animal than the general public, who have nothing but his performances to guide them. Still, for all that, much though it might gratify his pride to rub shoulders with the salt of this world, nothing blinded John Bramton when it became a question of pounds, shillings, and pence. He had been money-grubbing, if you choose to call it so, all his life, which means that he had worked hard and used the clear calculating brain with which nature had gifted him, to the best of his ability. Few people could boast of having got the best

of John Bramton in business matters. Although a just man, he was, undoubtedly, a somewhat sharp practitioner in all his dealings; and even the man's natural vanity and pomposity all yielded to that dominant passion, of having the best of a deal. For the rest, he was no niggard; he would wrangle over half-a-crown in a matter of buying or selling, but you might swim in his wine, or revel in the best he had, that half-crown once satisfactorily adjusted. As to his daughters, he grudged them nothing; he had brought them up, as he said, like ladies, and his highest ambition now was to see them make what he called 'splendacious marriages.'

More than one feeler, with regard to the purchase of Damocles, was put out by various members of the turf community. A small syndicate of bookmakers, the moving spirit of which was Mr James Noel, were prepared to make a very handsome bid for the colt; but John Bramton could not as yet make up his mind. Stubber had told him that he possessed a verit-

able gold mine in Damocles, and, so far, Mr Stubber had most assuredly told him the truth. Rich stake after rich stake had been credited to Mr Bramton's account at Wetherbys'; and had not Damocles just put the final crown of glory upon his two-year-old career, by carrying the extreme penalties and winning the Middle Park Plate in a canter. John Bramton could not make up his mind whether it was not more profitable to keep this horse than to sell it. The continued successful career of Damocles, and the enthusiasm of Mr Stubber about the future of his pet, urged John Bramton to stick closely to his prize: on the other hand, his old business instincts told him there was danger in holding 'perishable goods' too long; and a man may know nothing about horse-flesh, but still be quite aware of the numerous vicissitudes it is subject to.

The luck of the Bramton jacket indeed had occasioned no little talk at Newmarket during October, for no sooner had Damocles won the Middle Park Plate, and

established himself fairly in the position of first favourite for the next year's Derby, than the dark Lucifer made his *début*, and won a sweepstakes over the Criterion course in such style as to make many good judges think him also a colt of very superior excellence. True, it was pointed out that the half-dozen behind him had not shown great racing capabilities during the season, but then, on the other hand, the victory was a very hollow one, and there was no denying that the colt was a fine mover. Still, racing men were not likely to jump at the conclusion that Lucifer was as good as Damocles, without much better grounds to go upon than they had at present.

One man, however, had some reason to think this might turn out to be the case, and that was Mr Skinner. The trainer had told him in July that he had a high opinion of Lucifer; that he regarded him as a smart colt, but that he was so backward then that he had never been able to rightly take his measure. It was possible Stubber

could tell him a good deal more about the colt now, if he chose. Skinner had been an intimate friend of the late Richard Bramton's, and was, consequently, upon friendly terms with Mr Stubber. He determined, the Houghton Meeting being over, to go and have a friendly talk with that gentleman, in the interests of his client, Lord Ranksborow. The Earl was a great favourite of Mr Skinner's : the commissioner never forgot that he was the first man who had helped him to climb the ladder. The Earl also always treated him with great consideration. He was rather proud of the privilege of being occasionally asked to Knightshayes. True, he went down there strictly in a business point of view, but still he had always good reason to be satisfied with his quarters.

Mr Stubber welcomed the commissioner to breakfast with great cordiality. He was one of those trainers who never made any mystery about his charges, but from whom, in despite of their apparent candour, you

are apt to gain surprisingly little information. In Mr Skinner's case, this would probably be different. He was one of the initiated, and had more than once been entrusted with a commission from the stable.

'Well, Stubber,' said the bookmaker, as he sat down, 'your string is in great form this back end. If poor Dick Bramton were alive, he'd have given the Ring a shaker next year.'

'Yes,' replied the trainer; 'he would have held a nice hand of trumps. As it is, I'm bothered out of my life what to do. You see, there's no knowing what this Mr Bramton will be up to. I ventured to tell him Lord Ranksborow had got most of the long shots about Damocles.'

'You told him that?' asked Skinner sharply.

'Yes; simply to assure him that his lordship would abide by the offer he made Richard Bramton—that is, to let him have what he liked out of them.'

‘And what did he say?’

‘His eyes twinkled, and then he laughed, and said,—“Bless you, Stubber, I never bet; and as for the horse, I shall most likely have sold him before next May.” Now what can you do with an owner like that?’

‘Never fear, man,’ replied Mr Skinner; ‘he won’t sell Damocles: his vanity won’t let him. You see, he has bought a place close to Knightshayes, and he’s mighty anxious to stand well with the Earl and his family. You were right about Lucifer: he’s a smart colt that.’

‘He is that, and no mistake,’ rejoined the trainer. ‘I’ll tell you what, there’s mighty little to choose between the pair, at even weights.’

‘What! you mean to tell me you could win the Derby with either of them?’

‘I can tell you this,’ replied Stubber. ‘Lucifer was in the trial just before the Middle Park Plate, and I set Damocles to give him seven pounds, and the dark ’un won clever by half a length.’

‘By Jove, it is a hand of trumps, and no mistake!’ exclaimed Mr Skinner. ‘I only wish poor Dick had been alive to play ’em.’

‘Isn’t it aggravating,’ said the trainer, ‘to have to deal with an owner who has the winner of the Derby in his stable, and can’t make up his mind as to whether he will sell the horse or win the race?’

‘Never you mind that, Stubber,’ replied the commissioner; ‘a much greater puzzle, to my mind, is who is pulling the strings? The first time I saw John Bramton, I thought he knew nothing about horse-racing; but I’m not at all sure about that now. I’m blessed if I don’t think his ignorance is all affectation. Now who put it into his head to keep Lucifer when he sold his horses? Answer me that.’

‘Well, as I told you before,’ rejoined the trainer, ‘I didn’t; and it couldn’t have been his own judgment, because he had never even seen him.’

‘Just so,’ replied Mr Skinner meditatively; ‘and it isn’t likely that it was

Lord Ranksborow. If the Earl was managing matters, there would be no question of selling Damocles.'

'Certainly not,' replied Mr Stubber. 'There is no man in England would make such a good thing of it if Damocles is first past the post at Epsom next May.'

'What ought to be done is quite clear,' said Mr Skinner. 'Lord Ranksborow is perfectly reasonable, and would let Mr Bramton take as much as he liked of his book. The game would be to win the Derby with Damocles; he would then naturally be first favourite for the Leger, and one would have the whole summer to bet against him in. Of course, at Doncaster, you would win with Lucifer, and the British public would once more discover that, in their anxiety to find the pea, they had again put their money down on the wrong thimble.'

'It takes my breath away only to think of,' said Stubber. 'There never was such a chance. It would set us all up for life!'

‘Ah!’ rejoined the commissioner, as he rose, ‘if poor Dick had only been alive to, as he used to say, “teach the British public that he didn’t keep horses exclusively for their amusement.” Well, Stubber, good-bye; we know how the game ought to be played, but it’s impossible to guess how it will be played, until we know who persuaded Mr Bramton to keep Lucifer.’

Still ruminating on this problem, Mr Skinner took his departure, destined to be still further astonished when, a little later on, he had elucidated the puzzle. As he said in after years,—‘I’ve seen many queer doings on the turf. I’m not a fool, and can generally get to the bottom of things; but, Lord love me, when a lady owns racehorses, you don’t know where you are. They are creatures of impulse, you see, and would strike a horse out of a race, just because they found out that some one who has offended them, had backed it for a five-pound note!’

Still turning over in his mind who could be John Bramton's mysterious adviser, Mr Skinner made his way back to London. The only solution of the mystery that he could see, was that Richard Bramton must have left very minute instructions concerning the disposal of his stud; but that such instructions would be embodied in a will, never for one instant crossed Mr Skinner's imagination.

As for Stubber, that veteran trainer had never in all his life been so exercised about all his charges. He was conscious he had the care of probably the two best two-year-olds of the year,—that there was the possibility of winning a very large sum over them in the ensuing year, if only they were judiciously managed. Skinner had most clearly indicated the tactics that ought to be pursued with them, and nothing could be more plain and straightforward. Mr Stubber had been a hard-working man all his life, he had done his duty

fairly and conscientiously by his numerous employers, but he had not as yet succeeded in putting by much money. Now he had a chance of winning a nice little stake, at comparatively small risk, and here he was cursed with an employer to whom common sense—that is, from a racing point of view—seemed absolutely wanting.

Well, it was no use ; he had done his duty by the 'osses, and meant doing it, but it was exasperating to think that they were the property of a man who took no pride in their victories, and did not, he veritably believed, know them apart. Besides the solid pudding, Mr Stubber further coveted a share of the laurels of his profession. He had never trained a winner of the classic races, and it was the first time that even the opportunity had been vouched him. Let alone the money, it was hard to be denied the chance of leading the winner of the Derby in, for once in his life.

CHAPTER V.

‘I’LL MAKE LOVE TO ONE.’

As Mr Skinner had surmised, Stubber’s incautious admission that Lord Ranksborow had backed Damocles to win an enormous stake at Epsom, let a flood of light into the mind of John Bramton. He had often chuckled over his noble neighbour’s attempt to buy the colt from him at very much less than his value; but he thought that was all, and in business, John Bramton looked upon that as a perfectly justifiable thing to do. Had he not been all his life endeavouring, and pretty successfully too, to buy in a cheap market and sell in a dear one. If Lord Ranksborow had contrived to

have bought Damocles for a low sum, Bramton would merely have said, 'Smart man his lordship, had me about that horse pretty tidily,' and he would have set himself steadily to see how it was possible to get the best of his lordship; but he saw clearly now that Damocles represented quite a fortune to the Earl, and that the possession or control of the colt was a matter of the highest importance to him. This, then, was the reason why he so earnestly advised him not to part with the horse; this was the reason why, in the first place, he had been so anxious to buy, and this was the reason why the Knightshayes people had been so wondrous civil to them. Well, he was not a thin-skinned man; his wife and daughters wanted to know the county magnates, and by what means it was brought about, was of little consequence. Mr Bramton chuckled much over his discovery, though, like a wise man, he did not think it necessary to acquaint his wife or daughters with it.

Now if there was one thing likely to determine John Bramton not to part with Damocles, it was the fact of two or three people endeavouring to buy him. So much money had been made out of the colt's successes, and his value had so evidently increased, that Bramton was afraid of not getting a sufficiently large sum for the horse. He felt that he did not as yet understand this new business that he had entered upon, but he had a leading idea that it was a business in which every man's hand was against his neighbour. He was an active, good-natured man, devotedly attached to his daughters, next to which, his prevailing passion was money making. He was no niggard with his wealth, and spent it freely, but he never could resist the temptation of turning a penny, and had more than once—since he had been wealthy—purchased property solely with the view of selling it again. This propensity made him coquette with the offers about Damocles; he would not positively

refuse to sell the colt, but always answered that he hadn't made up his mind,—that he thought the horse was worth more than was bid. Pressed to say what he would take, he would reply vaguely that he would think it over, and let the bidder know. So that, during these winter months, the turf was much exercised about the fate of the favourite for next year's Derby, while as for Mr Stubber, he declared 'he could not rest o' nights for thinking of what news the post might bring in the morning,—for thinking that at any moment he might hear the 'osses were to leave his stable!'

In the meantime, he complied punctually with the instructions of his new master, by despatching him a bulletin of the health of his charges, or, as Mr Bramton put it, an 'invoice of the stocks.'

West Barkshire was very gay that winter, and the Bramtons by this time were well received in the county. Although John Bramton had not sustained the character of a sportsman, with which

it had pleased his neighbours to endow him, yet he had made himself popular with that class. He had subscribed liberally to the hounds, and though he was never seen outside of a horse, a fox was always to be found in his coverts. Similarly, though he never shot himself, he was liberal in allowing other people to shoot over his estate, which, though not a large one, was well stocked with game. The daughters, too, were pretty, popular girls, and though they did not pretend to ride to hounds, were graceful and accomplished horsewomen, and constantly to be seen at the covert side, attended by a sedate-looking groom, when the hounds met their side of the county. Then Temple Rising was a house in which things were well done. John Bramton, and his better-half also, were not the people for one instant to sanction lavish expenditure, but, on the other hand, if there was sharp supervision, there was no parsimony. The host knew what good wine was, and kept a good cook, so that Temple Rising speedily

obtained the reputation of being a house worth staying in. Then the Ranksborows having taken them up, of course, gave the Bramtons a great lift in the county society, and it became the fashion to regard the vulgarisms of the parent Bramtons as mere eccentricities. The shrewd business capacities, too, of the master of Temple Rising were becoming known in his neighbourhood, and he began to play his part in various local boards and directions, and had good reason to suppose that he would shortly be appointed a magistrate of the county.

Knightshayes, too, had seen a good deal of company that winter, and amongst other men who had spent much time there, were Lord Dartree and Alec Flood. The eldest scion of the house of Ranksborow did not, as a rule, much trouble the paternal roof-tree. He usually came down there to shoot a little in the winter, —was apt to speak rather contemptuously of the West Barkshire hunt, and declared that the shires was the only place in which

that sport was worth pursuing. But this year, motives of economy had compelled him to give up all idea of Leicestershire. Lord Dartree, indeed, was a gentleman who burnt the candle at both ends. He liked to race and bet heavily all the summer season, and to hunt all day, and play whist all night, at Melton, during the winter. He was no fool, but 'cards will run the contrary way, as well is known to all who play,' and racehorses do not always do what is expected of them; and so Lord Dartree, who had had what is termed 'a bad year,' found himself constrained to either hunt from Knightshayes, or not hunt at all, so, after bitter repinings at his confounded luck, Dartree made up his mind to betake himself for this winter to the paternal roof-tree.

The father and son were very good friends, but between the reigning monarch and the heir-apparent there is constantly friction about that little matter of the supplies. Dartree had always capacity for spending two or three times

his income, while, on the other hand, if there was any excess of expenditure of that kind to be accomplished, the Earl was quite capable of doing it himself; however, Lord Dartree and his father had never quarrelled much upon this point, as the former knew too well the true state of the case was that the Earl positively could not find the money if he tried. Father and son had had more than one serious talk over the situation, and they both agreed that there was nothing but the victory of Damocles could keep their heads above water much longer.

'There can be no doubt about it,' said the Earl; 'it behoves us to be mighty civil to those Temple Rising people, and, if possible, make Bramton keep Damocles till after Epsom. Stubber will do him every justice, and he told me, last time I saw him, that the colt was thoroughly sound, wind and limb.'

'Surely Bramton would only be too glad to rely upon the experience of an old turfite like yourself,' observed Dartree.

‘I’m not at all sure about that,’ replied the Earl. ‘He is sharp enough, and given to decide things for himself. His weak point is a desire to get into society. He thinks a deal of knowing us ; and what influence I possess over him, comes from that ; and it tickles the vanity of his wife and daughters to be taken up by a countess.’

Dartree laughed, as he replied,—

‘The wind sets in that quarter, does it? My mother, I think, can be safely left to manage all that.’

‘Yes ; she told me so, and she has done her spiriting very well. She has managed to infuse considerable enthusiasm for the turf into the two Miss Bramtons. By the way, as you’re going to be down here for the winter, you might do your part. I’ve known you pretty good at the philandering business, when there was no good to be gained by it.’

‘All right, sir,’ replied Lord Dartree gaily. ‘I’ll make love to one, or both

the young ladies, if you like. Not an unpleasant task that, for they are a couple of very pretty girls.'

'Yes, they are that ; but mind, Dart, don't be a fool, and go too far, or else it'll end in a row,—the very thing we want to avoid.'

In compliance with this conversation, Lord Dartree took every opportunity of making himself agreeable to the Miss Bramtons. At first he was perfectly indiscriminate in his attentions, but the character of the two girls soon decided him on confining himself to one.

Miss Bramton was a coquette to the tips of her fingers, a thorough adept in the art of flirtation, and always ready to respond to any challenge of that nature. Then another thing that swayed the mischievous Dartree in his choice of the two girls, was the discovery, to his delight, that he was making Sir Kenneth Sandiman jealous ; for that gentleman, after much vacillation, had thoroughly settled down as Miss Matilda's admirer.

Sir Kenneth had made up his mind to prosecute his suit in real earnest, and he viewed with some dismay the appearance in the field of so formidable an antagonist. He counted so immensely upon the position that he could confer upon any lady he might make his wife, but he was forced to admit that to be Lady Sandiman could not compare with the prospect of becoming Countess of Ranksborow. As for Miss Matilda, she was in high glee, smiled sweetly on both her admirers, and played them off against each other, like the accomplished actress a woman of her nature invariably is.

The Knightshayes people mixed freely in all the gaieties of the winter. The Ladies Cuxwold were girls really fond of dancing, and went to most of the county balls in their vicinity; they also were constantly to be found at the covert side, so that altogether the Bramtons saw a good deal of their noble neighbours.

A man who apparently paid a good

deal of attention to Lucy, was Alec Food. Nobody had ever suspected Alec of being a marrying man—not that he was in the slightest degree a misogynist. On the contrary, he could talk pleasantly enough with women, and rather affected their society; but Alec Flood was a man with queer ways and whims. You must not think from this that he was eccentric in his manners or dress. He was as conventional, pleasant, gentlemanly a man as you would meet in any London drawing-room; but then he would disappear from his friends without notice, and for an indefinite period. He would pack his portmanteau, and depart for the other side of the world, just as the whim seized him. He got tired of a place, or it might be with the people he was associating with; and the absurd reasons he gave for his caprices, were the delight of his friends. Sometimes he could no longer stand the prevailing fashion in dress: he had been known to assert that he had left England because

he could really bear the sight of red parasols no longer! He had gone to the East, at another time, to escape from the intolerable garrulity of the House of Commons, as administered to him by the daily journals.

‘I started,’ he said, on that occasion, ‘simply in search of a place without a paper.’

‘And you found it?’ inquired one of his auditors.

‘Oh, yes, I found it; there’s not much trouble about finding such a place in the East. No, you need not ask where it is. You’re quite capable of going out and setting up a local paper, if you knew that!’

The real fact of the matter was, that Alec Flood was an idle man with independent means, and an inexhaustible lust of travel. He kept a permanent set of rooms in London, which, as Dartree said, was the one place on the globe in which you need never expect to find him.

Lucy Bramton most certainly attracted

him. There was a certain bond of sympathy between them, in the remembrance of the peculiar circumstances under which they had first met ; and Lucy liked to hear him talk of the queer adventures he had met with, and the strange places he had been in. Alec, when he liked, was a good talker, and also had the faculty of narration ; he was by no means always to be induced to recount his own experiences, but, when he was, he usually held his hearers enchained for the time. Then they had another point of mutual interest, and that was no other than the Honourable Jack Cuxwold. Jack was one of Alec Flood's special friends. They had been travelling companions many a time and oft, and had stood side by side in more than one of those awkward incidents that turn up when you abandon the railways of civilisation, and betake yourself to camels, mules, and the charge of Bedouins or other scarce dependable escort. It might have been supposed that Lucy would have heard much more of Jack

from his own people, but it was not so. Jack Cuxwold was not much given to letter writing, and wrote far more frequently to Alec Flood than he did to any one else. Alec was, it need hardly be said, on the best of terms with them all, and a favoured visitor at Knightshayes; but it was as Jack's especial friend that he was always regarded, and it was indeed through his friendship for the latter that he first became acquainted with the Ranksborow family. Both Flood and Lucy followed the accounts of the great procession of boats up the Nile with the keenest interest, and this again, perhaps, drew them somewhat together. Still, it never occurred for one instant to any of the Knightshayes people that there could be anything between Alec Flood and Lucy Bramton.

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER BID FOR DAMOCLES.

‘It’s absurd,’ exclaimed Miss Bramton, ‘but it is so like papa! As Lord Dar-tree said the other day, he does not seem to comprehend his obligations. As an owner of racehorses, he is a public character. People look at him, as the owner of the favourite for the Derby, with great interest, and now he talks of selling Damocles. Why, it would be to lose all our prestige in the county. It mustn’t be, mamma!’

‘I quite agree with you, Matilda; but you know what your father is! He is such a one for turning a penny.’

‘Still,’ said Lucy quietly, ‘if the horse

wins the race, we shall get the stakes, and still have him to sell.'

'Just what I pointed out to your father,' said Mrs Bramton. 'But he says he is no gambler, and that should Damocles be beat, he won't be worth so much as he is now. He declares if he gets a good bid, from a good man, he shall close.'

'It's really too bad of him,' said Miss Bramton, in mortified tones.

Lucy knit her brows, and then remarked quietly,—

'Don't fret about it, Matilda; I will speak to papa. I think, when I remind him that Damocles was Uncle Dick's dying bequest, he won't insist upon it. My wishes surely ought to be consulted in the matter, and they are to carry out Uncle Dick's intentions to the best of my ability.'

'Quite right, Lucy,' said Miss Bramton. 'Of course your wishes ought to be considered; and I am sure you would not be, what Lord Dartree calls so

“unsportsmanlike,” as to part with the favourite on the eve of a big race.’

‘Of course not,’ cried Lucy, laughing. ‘England expects that every sportsman shall do his duty, if he can; and we really must amongst us keep papa up to the mark; at least that is what Lord Dartree says, is it not?’

‘Yes,’ replied Miss Bramton. ‘It’s what every one says; and it can’t be too much impressed on papa that he is now a public character,—that what he did when he was nobody at Wimbledon didn’t matter, but it’s very different now he is Mr Bramton of Temple Rising.’

‘Why, do you know, mamma, I overheard Mr Berriman say that he wondered whether Mr Bramton had any idea of coming forward for the county.’

‘Lor’!’ said Mrs Bramton; ‘just fancy your father an M.P.’

‘I trust he won’t think of it,’ said Lucy. ‘We shall most likely get into hot water with the Knightshayes people.’

‘How so?’ inquired Miss Bramton.

‘Why, papa’s politics are different from Lord Ranksborow’s; and I have an idea that the Earl considers this division of the county should be represented by some one who meets with his approval. I have an idea that the noble lord can be very awkward when he is thwarted.’

‘Did you get your information from Mr Flood, my dear?’ asked Miss Bramton, somewhat maliciously.

‘In part,’ rejoined Lucy. ‘However, I don’t suppose we need trouble our heads about that yet. The main thing is at present, that we keep Damocles.’

‘Carried, *nem. con.*!’ exclaimed Miss Bramton.

The scene of the above conversation was the drawing-room at Temple Rising, and, as may be gathered from it, neither Mrs Bramton nor her eldest daughter were aware that the absolute control of Damocles rested with Lucy. They had seen John Bramton authorise the sale of several horses in July, and they looked upon it that, as Lucy’s trustee, it was

quite at his discretion to do as he liked about the three remaining ones. The girl herself knew better, but she made no mention of her powers to any one. But, for all that, she is very determined on the one point,—that Damocles should run for the Derby, and that they shall be all there to see. With the exception of the one experience of the Julys, Lucy has as yet seen nothing of her horses ; but she was fully determined that should not be the case next year. As before said, she differed much from her sister with regard to racing. To Matilda Bramton it was simply a matter of an outing, —a picnic, a garden-party, what you will ; but Lucy, as far as she understood it, felt a genuine interest in it. However, this was all over for the present, and her interests just now were far more centred in the great expedition up the Nile than in the gallops of Mr Stubber's charges.

An event looked forward to with great interest in the neighbourhood was the

Hunt Ball, and steeplechases at Wroxeter. This was an annual business which usually attracted a large gathering, and filled the hotels. The country gentlemen, with their wives and daughters, all flocked into the county town to enjoy a ball in the evening, and to wind up with a day's cross-country racing on the morrow. Both at Knightshayes and Temple Rising great interest was manifested about the steeplechases, for Lord Dartree was going to run a horse, which he had been duly qualifying with the West Barkshire hounds, and meant to ride himself. And as he had already shown himself a promising horseman, his family were all sanguine of his success. In fact, it had been settled between the two families that they should join forces, and put up at the same hotel at Wroxeter for the affair. Both the Earl and John Bramton were stewards of the races,—the former according to annual custom; while as to the latter, as the clerk of the course put it,—‘How could you leave out the owner of the

favourite for the coming Derby?' more especially when, as in John Bramton's case, he was in a position to give a liberal donation to the Race Fund.

The vanity of the master of Temple Rising was not a little tickled by the compliment. He liked to be considered a patron of horse-racing. One thing about which impressed him very favourably, namely, that it involved no suggestion of his getting on a horse himself. As in the summer time, he was exercised on the subject of his get-up, and had some thoughts of consulting Lord Dartree on the subject. But that young gentleman had recently horrified him by suggesting that he, Mr Bramton, should pick up a steeplechaser, and run it at Wroxeter; and a horse for any purposes of racing Mr Bramton looked upon as a very unprofitable investment. However, he need not have taken alarm, as Lord Dartree's was one of those idle suggestions men make vaguely for mere conversation. In the meantime, Mr Stubber's weekly re-

ports from Newmarket were of the most glowing description. Mr Bramton was quite unaware of it, but it was a standing jest amongst the sporting men of West Berkshire to ask after the health of Damocles, Mr Bramton's quaint replies to such interrogations being always a source of amusement. He would reply, 'He was doing nicely,' that 'he was as well as could be expected,' which, though not absolutely wrong, is hardly the way men express themselves about horses. But there was one thing John Bramton knew better than to say about Damocles, to wit, that he had the slightest idea of selling him. True, he had told the Earl of Ranksborow that he had some thoughts of it, and said so openly at the dinner-table at Knightshayes, but it was tacitly understood in the neighbourhood that he had abandoned his intention. And the Earl probably was the only man in Berkshire who still suspected him of that idea.

One afternoon the Earl rode over to Temple Rising, and, after paying his

respects to the ladies, told John Bramton that he wanted to say a word to him on business. Mr Bramton at once led the way to his study.

‘Now, my lord,’ he said, ‘there’s nobody will interrupt us here. I am at your service.’

‘I heard this morning, from a man in whom I place the greatest confidence, that you were about to receive, if you’ve not already received, a very liberal offer for Damocles. You would, I fancy, find the money all right, and the nominal purchaser would be a Mr Robertson. I trust you won’t make up your mind to sell.’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Mr Bramton. ‘I really could not give you an answer on that point at present.’

‘Well, whatever you do,’ replied Lord Ranksborow, ‘you ought to know fairly what you’re doing, which will very possibly not be the case.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ replied Mr Bramton. ‘Surely I can dispose of property to any one I like? And this Mr

Robertson, you say, could be relied on to pay for the goods?’

‘Quite so, I fancy; but he will make one condition.’

‘What is that?’ asked Bramton.

‘That you say nothing to any one about having parted with the horse.’

‘Well,’ rejoined Bramton, ‘I see no great harm in that. I have bought myself occasionally under somewhat similar conditions, such as saying nothing about the price, etc.’

‘No; but you will have sold him into the hands of a set of bookmakers, who will not start him for the Derby.’

‘Oh, come, my lord, that’s not likely. Men don’t buy horses at the sort of price they’ll have to give for Damocles, just to keep him to look at.’

‘They will bid against him all the spring,’ returned the Earl, ‘and then not run him.’

‘That wouldn’t matter to me,’ replied Bramton. ‘I don’t bet, and they would have a right to do what they like with their own.’

‘The public thinks there is a limit to that, when it comes to racing,’ replied the Earl; ‘and you must bear in mind that if this sale is kept a secret, the horse will be regarded as yours till such time as it pleases them to strike it out. All the obloquy of the transaction would rest on your head.’

‘Well, my lord, that, of course, will be considered in the price.’

‘You don’t quite understand me, Mr Bramton.’

‘Better than you think, my lord,’ mentally ejaculated the owner of Temple Rising, who, placed through Stubber in possession of the fact that the Earl had backed Damocles at long odds to win an enormous stake, conceived himself perfectly aware of the Earl’s object in preventing any sale of the horse.

‘Allow me to point out to you,’ continued Lord Ranksborow, ‘that it will destroy your social position here. There are lots of people all over England, not in the least to be called betting men, who

always have a modest bet upon the Derby. Your friend Berriman, for instance, always goes up to see it, and has a tenner on the race. You don't understand racing, Mr Bramton, but you will find yourself very much cold-shouldered if you part with your horse to these people.'

'Then you mean to say,' rejoined Mr Bramton testily, 'that I'm expected not to part with the horse.'

'I don't say that,' rejoined Lord Ranksborow. 'I think you'll be unwise if you part with him to these people. But, sell to whom you may, mind it is quite an open transaction, and don't leave it till too late.'

'You think, then, Mr Berriman would cut me; and I suppose you and all the other folks round about would do the same?'

'That, Mr Bramton,' replied the Earl, with studied politeness, 'is a point on which it is quite unnecessary to give an opinion. I have backed your horse my-

self, and feel sure that such a mistake as you might have made through ignorance in selling him to Mr Robertson, will never be committed. I shall be sorry if you sell him at all, but perfectly acknowledge your right to dispose of him in an open way. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, my lord,' rejoined Bramton, 'and you may rest quite satisfied that I shall bear in mind what you say.'

Mr Bramton meditated for some time upon his visitor's remarks. He had quite made up his mind, at the beginning of the conversation, that the Earl was speaking entirely in his own interests; and so he owned he was; but it had occurred to that astute diplomatist that this was a sale which it was quite possible for him to prevent. As he rightly conjectured, John Bramton, in his ignorance of racing, had no idea of the social slur that would attach to him had he parted with Damocles under such conditions; and in his own county Lord Ranksborow knew very well that the people would side with

him if he pronounced social ostracism on John Bramton should he act in this manner. As for the latter, it need scarcely be said that this was a view of things that had never presented itself to him before. He was getting not a little puffed up by the position he had succeeded in obtaining in the county, and the idea of forfeiting all that was not only repugnant to him, but he knew would produce a frightful storm in his family. Mr Bramton was an obstinate man, and generally pretty resolute in what he meant to do, but he rather feared a battle-royal with his wife, and, in a more modified degree, with his eldest daughter, and he knew the mouths of the ladies would be filled with bitter reproach should he jeopardise their popularity in the neighbourhood.

‘No,’ he muttered to himself; ‘it’s possible to cut your fingers over a smart stroke of business, and I think I’ll have nothing to do with this. When Lord Ranksborow wanted to buy Damocles

himself, he was offering a deal less than the horse was worth. In short,' chuckled Mr Bramton to himself, 'was trying to take advantage of my youth and inexperience. He was not likely to blazon that story abroad, as it rather told against himself; while the neighbourhood could only laugh, and say, that I was not such a fool as the noble Earl took me for. But I understand now that to part with this horse before the Derby, will occasion all sorts of nasty remarks about me; and, by George! it's no use getting into society, only to be kicked out of it. And then—oh my! just think of Margaret and Matilda on the rampage! No—I'm dashed! We'll stick to Damocles, and win the Derby.'

Lord Ranksborow had struck the keynote at last, and would have been highly delighted with his morning's work, had he but known it.

CHAPTER VII.

FRONT DE BŒUF.

WHEN Jack Cuxwold struggled back to consciousness, a soft hand was laving his temples and moistening his swollen lips. He knew not where he was, he knew not into whose hands he had fallen, and had but a vague remembrance of what had happened to him. He strove to speak, but his tongue, swollen to an unnatural size, and hard as iron, refused to articulate. He had, in the course of the campaign, picked up a smattering of Arabic, and therefore quite comprehended when a woman's voice said to him gently,—‘Be still; try and swallow this.’ With some difficulty at

first he gulped down some half-dozen mouthfuls of water, then the rigid muscles began to relax, and he drank copiously. He was soon so far revived as to be able to assist his preserver, and to bathe his own face; and then he tried to raise himself, and to see who it was that had come to his rescue.

It was an Arab girl who, having strayed some slight distance from her tribe, had unexpectedly come across him. Her horse was standing some few paces off attentively watching the proceedings of his young mistress. Jack strove to rise to his feet, but was unable.

‘Lie still,’ said the girl; ‘continue bathing your face and body, and drink when you feel inclined. Some of my people will soon find us, and they will have plenty more water. Stay! I had best leave you for a few minutes. Do as I tell you, and don’t stir until I come back: I go for further help.’

She was true to her word. In less than ten minutes she returned with some four

or five fine-looking Arabs, who throwing themselves from their horses, at once began to render assistance to the unfortunate waif who had fallen into their hands. Cuxwold was, by this time, sufficiently recovered to sit up. By perpetually rubbing him, by perpetually bathing his face and temples, and by constant draughts of cold water, Jack at length was so far himself again as to struggle to his feet. That the Arabs were quite aware that he was an English officer, he gathered from their gestures, and though they showed no inclination to plunder or ill-use him, he had a strong impression that he was a prisoner in their hands. He noticed that the men paid great deference to the girl who had at first discovered him, so he appealed to her to replenish his water-bottle, restore him his dromedary, and put him on his way to the Wells of Abu Klea or Jakdul, whichever he might be nearest. But her answer was prompt, though gentle,—

‘Englishman,’ said she, ‘you are not

strong enough to proceed, nor would you ever find your way across the trackless sands to the route you have strayed from. You must stay in our tents for a day or two, till you have recovered. And then my father, Mohammed Sebekh, Sheikh of the Halawins, will consider what is best to be done with you; but I will answer for your safety.'

Jack Cuxwold felt there was nothing for it but to submit. He was making a terrible mess of his errand; but what could he do? His clear duty was to deliver those despatches as quickly as might be, and to fight his way through any Arabs who might try to meddle with him, let the odds against him be ever so great. His captors had not disarmed him, but it was little likely that they would permit him to mount his dromedary. They had saved his life undoubtedly, and he could hardly repay them by, in his endeavour to escape, taking theirs. Then, again, he was completely lost in the desert, and little likely

to recover the track without their assistance. All these things ran rapidly through his mind, and led to the only conclusion possible,—that he must give up all thoughts for the present of continuing his journey, and merely await such time as it pleased his captors to give him permission to proceed. They seated him once more upon his dromedary, and the girl then sprang lightly on her horse, and led the way. Jack noticed that the Arabs, although apparently leaving him at liberty, clustered round him in such manner as would make escape excessively difficult; and after riding some five or six miles, he was fain to confess that he was hardly in a fit state for a sharp hand-to-hand fight. Consumed with thirst, he had been utterly unable to eat, and this, with the agony he had endured, had temporarily exhausted his strength. A very little further, and they came to the Arab encampment.

The dusky tents of the children of Ishmael were situated in a ravine, at the bottom of which was the most precious of

all discoveries in the desert, namely water. The destruction of wells is, by the unwritten law of the desert, the one thing prohibited in warfare, and the fierce battle of Abu Klea, like the fierce struggle of Abu Kru, were both fought in the main to keep the infidels from the water. The Arab will callously condemn you to perish by thirst, but it must be by other means than tampering with the wells.

And now his captors signed to Cuxwold to dismount, and no sooner was that accomplished than they conducted him towards a tent, which, from its standing a little apart from the others, and from its larger size, proclaims itself the dwelling of some one of importance.

‘Englishman,’ said the girl, ‘you must first be brought before my father, and then you shall have the food and rest of which you doubtless stand in need.’

Raising the curtain of the tent, his conductor motioned him to follow her, and then Cuxwold was simply struck dumb with astonishment. A man, some-

thing over six feet high, rose to receive him, clad in a complete suit of chain armour. A singularly handsome man, whose black moustache and beard were but slightly grizzled. A superbly-built fellow, who wore his panoply of the Middle Ages as if to the manner born, looking every inch a chief, and one destined from birth to rule his brethren. He rose at Cuxwold's approach, and fixing his dark eyes keenly upon Jack, said, in a courteous voice, 'Stranger, you are welcome to our tents,' and then glanced at his daughter for an explanation.

'Father,' she said, 'I found this Englishman lost in the desert and dying of thirst. I have saved him, and my word is pledged for his life; but all else is left in your hands.'

'Englishman, you have heard,' said the Sheikh. 'Your life is my daughter's, as, but for her, you would have perchance fed the birds of the air by this; for the rest, you are my prisoner.'

Jack bent his head in reply, and once

more gazed in astonishment at the Sheikh. He thought of the 'Talisman,' for the man whom he stood before might, as far as his attire went, have been the Knight of the Leopard himself.

'You have come into a country,' continued the chief, 'to interfere with a quarrel that does not concern you. What are those dogs of Egyptians to you, that you should espouse their quarrel?—white-livered hounds, who have always fled before our spears. If I have not taken part against you, it is because that I believe that there is but one God, and Mahomet is His prophet, and that the Mahdi is but a lying prophet; but had it been a mere question of the Arab fighting against the Egyptian, my tribe should have fought against you at Abu Klea, and died to the last man, before you drank the blue waters of the Nile.'

'Father,' interfered the girl, 'the Englishman is faint from hunger and fatigue; let him rest now, I beseech you.'

‘It is good. Take him, Zelnè, and see that his wants are attended to.’

The girl made a sign to him that his audience was over, and after bowing to the Sheikh, Jack Cuxwold followed his conductress out of the tent. They were no sooner outside, than Zelnè made a sign to him to give up his arms, which she at once handed to one of the attendant Arabs. Then, leading the way to a similar, though smaller, canvas dwelling, she threw open the door and said, ‘Rest, Englishman, food and water shall be brought to you immediately.’

Left to himself, Jack Cuxwold began to muse over the situation. He certainly felt that his life was safe enough, but he was probably destined to undergo a considerable captivity. He had heard numerous stories of these restless children of the desert. How bitter they could be in fight, how reckless of their own lives, and merciless to their foes in the hour of victory, he knew well. They neither asked nor gave quarter. In all the hard

fighting he had seen, not once had he observed the stricken Arab,

‘Raise the craven cry *Aman!*’

but, once within their tents, he knew his life was sacred, and that unless he attempted to escape he ran no danger whatever. Still they could have no object in detaining him for any length of time, unless, it suddenly flashed across him, they put a pretty heavy ransom on his head. That stately warrior of the Middle Ages, Mohammed Sebekh, might be as mediæval in his habits as Front de Bœuf; but here the arrival of an Arab maiden with his repast put an end to his reflections, and, his meal once finished, Jack Cuxwold sank into a dreamless slumber.

When Jack awoke the next morning, that light-hearted Lancer felt quite himself again, and once more reverted to his reflections of the previous evening. ‘Hum,’ he muttered, ‘that brevet Majority for the carrying of despatches has dissolved itself into a mere mental delusion; and here is one of the brightest orna-

ments of Her Majesty's service, a prisoner in the tents of Shem. How that blessed old Crusader came by his rig-out I'd give something to know. There was no look of Birmingham about that sheet of mail. Indeed, in no old armoury I ever was in, did I see more beautiful steel links. I wonder whether the old legend is true, that when the Saracens were driven out of Palestine by the Crusaders, they crossed into the Soudan. Anyway, my friend here, who seems to regret he was not leading his merry men against us at Abu Klea, seems to have just come out of that campaign of eight centuries ago. A Saladin in Cœur de Leon armour; and, by Jove! I wonder what he intends to do with me. Deuced pretty girl his daughter; in short, the family is good-looking, and seems well-mannered, as far as I have got, but a chieftain who wears a steel frock coat, may be expected to develop a touch of Front de Bœuf at any moment.'

Jack Cuxwold is making no very wild conjectures, as there are certainly good

grounds for supposing that the Arabs, when driven out of Palestine, overran the Soudan, and drove out or made slaves of the negroes, both there and in the northern part of Kordofan, the warrior race, as usual, making short work of the inferior.

Two things Jack was very anxious to discover. The first was his whereabouts, and the second was how he had got off the route. The first of these questions was speedily cleared up, the Arab girl who brought him his food informing him, in reply to his questions, that they were camped by the Wells of Bayuda; and this made clear to Jack how it was that he had lost his way, for although he had never seen or been near those wells, he, like most other officers, had pored over such charts of the desert as the force had with them; and there were a good many of such charts. The desert was pretty well known, and it is almost unnecessary to say that the situation of the wells were among the most prominent landmarks. Cuxwold knew very well that the Bayuda Wells were about

fifty miles south-west of the Wells of Jakdul, and that, therefore, when he had been discovered by Zelnè, he had been in all probability somewhere about forty miles from these latter wells. On leaving Metammeh, he must very soon have struck too much to the west, thereby missing the Wells of Abu Klea, and so, getting off the regular route, he had drifted hopelessly and aimlessly into the desert. He strolled out of the tent and gazed about him. The number of camels and horses betokened a wealthy and powerful tribe. The men, too, were tall, fine-looking fellows, exceedingly well-armed, and Jack could not help thinking that it was quite as well his religious convictions had made Mohammed Sebekh hold aloof from the fray. 'A very dangerous contingent to have had against us at Abu Kru,' muttered Jack.

He had not been strolling about very long, indulging in all the luxury of a pipe, when a wild-looking Arab came up and made him understand that the Sheikh wanted to speak to him.

After a courteous salutation, Mohammed said to him,—

‘I want you to explain to me why you English have come into the Soudan. We came from across the sea, and won the land by our swords from the Ethiopians, a far bolder race than these miserable Egyptians, who have ever since been endeavouring to take it from us. With the help of Turkish soldiers, they have sometimes succeeded, but only to pay bitterly for it in the long run. Now you have come to help them, and none of you will ever see Korti again.’

‘As far as I am concerned, it depends pretty much upon yourself,’ replied Jack, in a devil-may-care sort of way, ‘but I fancy my comrades will come through all right, although I’m quite willing to admit your people fight splendidly.’

‘You think so, Englishman,’ replied the Sheikh. ‘You think to find your great Pasha alive in Khartoum. He is dead; and the city in the hands of the Mahdi.’

‘If what you tell me is true,’ replied

Jack, 'I can only say a grand soldier has gone to his death, and that every Englishman will be sorry we were too late to save him.'

'An Arab has not two tongues: what he speaks is the truth,' rejoined the Sheikh.

'By Jove! that is pretty tall talking,' muttered Jack to himself. 'At lying and thieving, I should say an Arab is quite as good as his neighbours.'

'Yes,' continued the Sheikh, 'you were too late to save him, and you are too late to save yourselves. An Arab knows how to revenge himself. You know the story of Nimr, the tiger of Shendy. When Mahomet Ali sent his son Ismail down to Shendy to collect tribute, Ismail treated Nimr, the Sheikh of the Shaygyehs, with contempt, and even went so far as to strike him with the stem of his chibouk. He had better have struck a tiger. He no longer pleaded for time to meet Ismail's demands, but promised that all should be gathered at once. Camels,

sheep, horses, corn, *dhurra* money, were collected and brought to the Pasha with the greatest alacrity and cheerfulness. Ismail and his troops were invited to partake of a great banquet. The merissa was handed freely about to both guards and sentries; at midnight, a great cry arose, a circle of flame surrounded the town, for the Shaygyehs had fired the corn. Ismail and his guard were burnt to cinders, and not one of his followers escaped the claws of the "tiger of Shendy."

'It is just as well that bloodthirsty old ruffian died a good many years ago,' thought Jack. 'Well, Sheikh,' he remarked aloud, 'my countrymen are in the open, and, if Gordon Pasha is dead, will return to Korti; and,' he concluded haughtily, 'all the Arabs in the Soudan won't stop them.'

Mohammed gave a contemptuous smile as he replied,—

'For the present, Englishman, you are safer in my hands than anywhere else.

Your life is safe, but if your friends desire to see you again, they will have to pay for it,' and, with a stately wave of his hand, the Sheikh intimated that their interview was over.

'Ah,' said Jack to himself, as he stepped out of the tent, 'thoroughly mediæval in his ideas, as I anticipated. Now, as there is no knowing what old Front de Bœuf will ask, and no knowing what ready money the contingencies of Newmarket have left the governor, my ransom will be a complicated affair. 'Tisn't likely a grateful country is going to pay a lot of money to recover a fellow who was d—d fool enough to lose his way.'

CHAPTER VIII.

FRONT DE, BŒUF'S LITTLE BILL.

AFTER leaving the Sheikh, Jack Cuxwold strolled to the verge of the encampment. Though he had nominally no guard over him, yet he had little doubt but that a keen eye was kept on his movements. Moreover, had he been free to start that moment, he had no knowledge of which way to travel. He strolled idly on to the edge of the encampment, when suddenly he came upon Zelnè, who, with one or two other maidens, was sitting gossiping at a tent door. The girl rose when she perceived him, and advanced to meet him, with the firm step and assured air of one who is a great lady amongst her people.

Jack had thought her pretty the previous day, but he had then been too exhausted to take due notice of her charms. Now he did her full justice. As he gazed on the lithe straight figure, the glossy dark hair, all brodered with gold coins, the soft, liquid black eyes, and delicately-chiselled features, Jack was fain to admit that in her own style he had seldom seen so handsome a girl as this Eastern beauty.

‘You are rested, Englishman, and have seen my father?’

‘Yes,’ replied Jack. ‘I have to thank you for saving my life. But for you, I must have perished in the desert.’

‘And what said my father to you?’ asked Zelnè.

‘That I must remain his prisoner. He seems angry at our presence in the desert, and says that my countrymen will never leave it,—that they are destined to lay their bones here.’

‘What my father says will probably happen,’ replied Zelnè. ‘It is well for you that you are with us. When you

have breathed the air of the desert for a few months, you will no longer desire to dwell in cities. Come and sit down with us. You shall tell us all about your own country. I have seen but few of your people.'

So the Lancer seated himself on the carpet by the side of the group of girls, devoutly wishing that he could only tuck his long legs away as cleverly as his companions, and good-humouredly submitted to a severe cross-examination about the habits and customs of his country.

Zelnè was treated with considerable deference by the other maidens, and was indeed the principal spokeswoman. But, much to Jack's astonishment, he found another of the girls, who, like Zelnè, knew a little English. The conversation, indeed, was carried on in a species of polyglot of English, Arabic, and pantomime, attended by much laughter. And Cuxwold began to think that his captivity would be at all events not hard to bear. Suddenly the tinkling of bells fell upon the ear. The

girls stopped their chattering, and Zelnè exclaimed,—

‘It is odd; strangers are approaching the wells. It is singular, for the Wells of Bayuda lie apart from any recognised track, and are seldom visited by caravans or traders.’

‘There would hardly be traders about in such times as these,’ remarked Cuxwold.

‘See,’ rejoined Zelnè, ‘those are traders,’ and she pointed to a small string of camels that were rapidly approaching. The newcomers were four in number, and consisted apparently of three Arabs and a European. ‘They are probably on their way to join the Mahdi. They would never be out here if they were seeking your countrymen, Englishman.’

In the meantime, the new arrivals had made their way up to the wells, and were busy quenching their own thirst, and watering their beasts. Jack’s attention was speedily attracted by the European, a slight dark man, with a decidedly Jewish cast of countenance. He evi-

dently spoke Arabic fluently, for he conversed freely with his companions, as he did also with some of the Halawin Arabs. But Jack's interest was thoroughly aroused when the Jewish-looking man's wrath became aroused by a refractory camel. He cursed it, to Jack's amusement, in an infinite variety of languages, and, amongst others, English. Now if there is one thing dwells in the memory, it is apt to be the human voice; the voice will often recall a person to one's recollection when the face has failed to do so. Jack Cuxwold had a misty idea of having seen the man's face before, but when he heard him vociferate, 'You damned pig-headed brute!' it all flashed across him. The last time he had heard that voice, and seen that face, was in the gambling house at Cairo! and equally well he remembered that the introducer of Flood and himself to that den had never been seen or heard of afterwards. Who had actually struck the fatal blow, neither he nor Flood had seen, but he did know that his Jewish-

looking acquaintance had been one of those who closed around Bramton just before it was struck.

Walking up to the man he remarked,—

‘They are obstinate brutes, are they not?’

The Jew looked round at him quick as lightning, and ejaculated,—

‘An Inglese in the tents of the Bagarras! How have you come here?’

‘No matter, my friend. Pray, what is your name?’

‘*Peste!* it is not usual to ask for the name in the desert. I have many. I travel what you call *incog.* often. Ben Israel will do as well as another just now. And you; what you do here?’

‘Where are you going? where are you bound for?’ asked Jack, utterly ignoring the other’s question.

‘We are peaceful traders, carrying our goods where we may find the best market,’ returned the other evasively. ‘*Chut!* Captain Cuxwold, what is the use of fencing?’ continued Ben Israel; ‘you are a prisoner here.’

True,' rejoined Jack, 'and you are the scamp who led me to that den in Cairo where the murder was committed.'

'Bygones are bygones,' rejoined the other. 'I can do you a good turn now. You pay me well, of course.'

'What is it?' inquired Cuxwold.

'I will let them know in Cairo where you are.'

'When shall you be in Cairo?' asked Jack.

'How should I know?' demanded Ben Israel testily. 'If we do good business, quick; if not, *quien sabe?*' and he gave a thoroughly French shrug of his shoulders.

The man was a Levantine Jew, and like many of his race, had he been at the building of the Tower of Babel would have been on colloquial terms with all the workmen, and have obtained possession of the main part of their weekly wages. One of that marvellous race that are selling oranges or acting as couriers to-day, and are impressarios of the opera, leading operators of finance, prominent

turfites, or keepers of a gambling-house, on the morrow—a shrewd-brained, loose-principled race, with as many lives as cats, and a power of adapting themselves to the making of money under any form. And Ben Israel, as he chose for the present to call himself, had tried his hand at many pursuits, and usually with more or less success. In short, he might have been a man of substance by this, had he not been an incorrigible gambler. He played, metaphorically, with cogged dice at one and all of his many vocations; but in the Levant, in Cairo, Alexandria, etc., so do your neighbours, and when it came to sheer gambling, it was usually a case of which player concealed most aces up his sleeve.

‘Think over what I say, Captain. But I know the Bagarras. You will pay dear before they will bring themselves to part with you. As for your friends who have gone to Khartoum, they will no more return.’

‘It was curious,’ Jack thought, ‘the unanimous belief there was amongst these

children of the desert that the British force was doomed to destruction ; he could not but believe that hard fighting there might be, but surely his old comrades would be equal to the occasion.

‘You overlook one thing, my friend,’ he said at length. If Mohammed Sebekh intends my being ransomed, he must let me communicate with the people who have got to find the money.’

For a minute or two the rapacious Jew was silent, and then he replied,—

‘It is as you will, Captain. The air of the desert is very healthful, but the life is a little, what you call, all the same—ah! I have him, *dull*.’

‘That doesn’t bear much upon the point,’ returned Jack. ‘I shall have to lead it until I am ransomed. I don’t see any particular point in paying you to carry a message which the Sheikh must send for me himself,’ and so saying, Jack turned away, and rejoined Zelnè.

‘*Chut!*’ muttered the Jew to himself. ‘The Captain has a very pretty notion of

making his sojourn here as endurable as possible. The Sheikh had better look to his daughter, or when that ransom comes, it will, perchance, give liberty to two.'

'You know that man?' said Zelnè.

'I met him once about two years ago in Cairo. He is a thorough scoundrel, and, I should think, capable of anything.'

'You are right,' replied the girl. 'He has visited us two or three times. He is an emissary of the Mahdi's. He has tried to persuade my father to take part against your people; but my father says the Mahdi is a lying prophet; and though he too defies the authority of the Khedive, he will none of the Mahdi. He says the sons of the desert have ever been free, and that their only lawful suzerain in this world is the Caliph, as head of their religion.'

'Does your father place trust in this Ben Israel, as he calls himself?' asked Jack.

'Yes; far more than I like,' replied Zelnè. 'Ben Israel is a man who appears in the desert only in times of commo-

tion, and it is odd how the sheikhs trust him, though they know he is here only to serve his own interests. Trust him not, Englishman; he would betray man, woman, or child, if he could obtain a piastre by doing so.'

'You must not call me Englishman,' said Jack.

'What am I to call you then,' replied the girl, smiling. 'I do not know your name, nor your rank. Are you a sheikh amongst your own people?'

'I am a soldier,' rejoined Jack, 'and captain of a band of sixty or seventy horsemen.'

'Ah! then I shall call you Captain—that is your title. And now, Captain, what did that man say to you? Stop, I will tell you partly what he did say to you. Whatever it was, you were to give him money for something or other.'

'Quite right, Zelnè,' replied Jack, laughing. 'He offered to take a letter to my friends, to let them know where I was, if I would pay him for taking it.'

‘Once again I say don’t trust that man,’ and with a warning gesture Zelnè gilded rapidly away to her own tent.

In the course of the afternoon Jack Cuxwold received a message from the Sheikh, to the effect that he wished to speak to him. Jack hastened to comply, and found Mohammed Sebekh in close conference with Ben Israel.

‘Englishman,’ said the former, ‘I have had much talk about you with my friend here, and he has told me of the rank you hold amongst your own people. This has enabled me to fix the number of piastres I shall demand for your redemption. It is you who have disturbed the peace of the desert. My countrymen would long ago have settled with these dogs of Egyptians, had you not supported them. If you did not make the war in the Soudan, it is your men and your gold which has prolonged it. It is fit that you should pay for disturbing the peace of the country.’

‘Front de Bœuf might have been brought up in an attorney’s office,’ thought

Jack, as he listened to the Sheikh's specious pleading.

‘In the money of your own country, I demand five thousand pounds.’

‘Good Sheikh,’ returned Jack sentimentously, ‘I don’t pretend that I want either to live or to die in the desert, but whether my friends can or will pay that amount of money, I can’t say.’

‘If they don’t, Captain Cuxwold, then I think you will die in the desert.’

‘Ah!’ chimed in Ben Israel, ‘life is sweet; what is five thousand pounds to a rich Englishman? You destroy, deface, this beautiful country. *Sacré*, you must pay for him.’

‘My friend,’ continued the Sheikh, ‘is willing to take a letter for you to Cairo. As I have told you, Khartoum has fallen, and you English will never return to Korti. Write then and tell your friends in Cairo to make arrangements to send this money up to Khartoum.’

‘I will not write by that messenger, Sheikh. I will not trust him.’

‘You are foolish, Captain,’ replied the attacked, with the utmost indifference to the accusation against his good faith. ‘Bah!’ he exclaimed, turning to the Sheikh, ‘the Captain got into a little disturbance, unfortunately, under my guidance, in Cairo. It was not my fault. It was one of his own countrymen caused the disturbance.’

‘Who was first cheated, and then murdered there,’ interposed Jack sharply.

‘Hard words, hard words, Captain,’ said Ben Israel. ‘He lose his temper when he lose his money. There was a row, and somebody stabbed him.’

‘When men quarrel they use steel,’ remarked the Sheikh sententiously. ‘I suppose you Englishmen, when you differ, don’t settle it with your tongues, like a pack of old women?’

‘I should have thought the last few weeks might have taught your countrymen to tell a different tale. Ask those who met us at Abu Klea, or fought against us at Abu Kru, whether Englishmen were

old women to fight against,' said Jack haughtily.

The Sheikh's eyes blazed with anger for a moment, and he bit his moustache, while, as for Ben Israel, he looked as amused as a mischievous monkey.

'You will do as you like,' remarked Mohammed Sebekh at length; 'but I warn you, it may be some time before you will have another opportunity of sending a letter.'

'I trust that man with no letter of mine,' returned Jack curtly, and, saluting the chief, he turned and left the tent.

CHAPTER IX.

‘I SHALL NEVER FORGET YOU, ZELNÈ.’

JACK CUXWOLD abided stubbornly by his expressed resolve. It surely could not be long before he had an opportunity of communicating with his friends; besides, he had experience of the mysterious way in which news spread in the East, and was not without hope that intelligence of his captivity would speedily reach Korti. Mohammed Sebekh seemed quite positive that Khartoum had fallen, and yet when Jack left the banks of the Nile, none of them were aware of Gordon's fate. Sir Charles Wilson had not even left Metammeh when he came away. Still he mistrusted the Jew, and Zelnè's warning

only confirmed him in this opinion. His impression was that Ben Israel would seize upon any money that might pass through his hands, but would be utterly indifferent about procuring his release. During the short time of their halt, he noticed that worthy was upon extremely friendly terms with the Sheikh ; and from what he had gathered, Jack rapidly came to the conclusion that Front de Bœuf was a regular trimmer, and only awaiting events to take part with the winning side ; equally ready to fall upon the flank of Wilson's shattered column, if it met with disaster, or to join with the Mahdi in the plundering of Khartoum.

‘Yes,’ said Jack to himself, ‘Front de Bœuf’s aspect is warlike, and his manners stately ; but appearances are deceitful. His grandiloquent speech took me in at first. I thought him a grand type of mediæval chivalry, brave as his sword, and a man whose word was his bond, but I regret to say that I begin to think Zelnè’s father is a mendacious, double-

facec cateran, quite of the old Highland type. I should fancy thieving, cattle-lifting, and black-mailing passing caravans, were his chief avocations.'

After a halt of a good twenty-four hours, Ben Israel and his friends proceeded on their journey.

'You're wrong, Captain,' said the Jew, as he mounted his camel, 'not to take my offer. Be sure Khartoum has fallen, and there is no more business to be done in the Soudan. If your people get away, they will be lucky. I hope we shall meet again in Cairo.'

'You impudent scoundrel!' replied Jack. But the Jew made no reply, except to smile and wave his hand, and again stretched forth in the desert with his companions.

Meanwhile the Halawins continued to linger near the Wells of Bayuda. Jack Cuxwold, at the time, had no idea of what was the Sheikh's motive for remaining; but the fact was, Mohammed Sebekh was awaiting the turn of events. He knew

perfectly well that his countrymen had been badly beaten at Abu Klea, and had failed to prevent the English from reaching the Nile. He felt sure that the English would go up to Khartoum before they left, to discover Gordon's fate, and he thought that during that time the Mahdi would have rallied his forces, and, taking advantage of his great superiority in numbers, would yet again try conclusions with the English; and on the result of that battle rested Mohammed Sebekh's decision. If, as he fully anticipated, it went against the English, then he and his powerful tribe were prepared to swoop down on the flank of the broken column, and take part in its annihilation. If, on the other hand, the English should be victorious, then the crafty Sheikh had made up his mind there would be no use in his mixing himself up in this imbroglio. These English, he knew, were a powerful nation, with numbers of fighting men at their disposal, and in their hour of victory they might inflict bitter vengeance on

those who had warred against them, and exact terrible atonement for the death of their great Chief who had fallen at Khar-toum.

But, as we know, Wilson had fought his way up to that city, and ascertained that Gordon was slain. Redvers Buller had arrived at Metammeh with instructions, now that Gordon's fate was ascertained, to withdraw the column as speedily as might be ; and the Mahdi's men had been too roughly handled lately to as yet venture to interfere with the foe on his retreat. Contrary to all Mohammed Sebekh's calculations, the news reached him that the English were retreating unpursued, and had actually once more reached the Wells of Jakdul. It was his own scouts who brought him this intelligence, for it may be remembered he was only a long day's ride from that place. As Jack had surmised, his fate by this time had, to some extent, become known. It was perfectly clear that he had left Metammeh with despatches, that he had

never been seen at the Wells of Jakdul by the detachment there, and that he had never arrived at Korti ; that he had fallen into the hands of the Arabs was obvious, and already inquiries were being made about him, although with small hope of his ever being heard of alive again. The war had been conducted in such sanguinary fashion, the Arabs neither asking nor giving quarter, that it was scarce likely he had been spared, and for the present Jack Cuxwold figured in the returns under the ominous list of 'missing.'

During these two or three weeks Jack became on excellent terms both with his host and his host's daughter. The Sheikh kept up all the stately air of a great noble, and a very mirror of chivalry, but the marauding side of his character constantly cropped up, and upon one occasion he told Jack in confidence that he had been foolish in not placing a far higher price upon him.

'I have paid you a very bad compli-

ment, Effendi, in not naming a much higher sum for your ransom. You are not only a great chief amongst your warriors, but also you belong to one of your great English houses. Ben Israel told me all about you.'

'I should like to twist that little miscreant's neck,' muttered Jack, between his teeth. 'You mistake, Sheikh,' he said aloud. 'True, my father is a noble, but he is a poor man. As you know, it is not the best born always who are the wealthiest.'

'I have no doubt he has broad lands and large herds,' said the Sheikh sententially; 'and he will willingly spare of his herds to have his son safe back with him. In a few days now, I will send a messenger to Korti, so have your letter ready.'

'All right,' replied Jack. 'And now, Sheikh, I should like to ask you one question:—Where did you get your armour?'

'It has been in my family for cen-

turies, and passed down regularly from father to son. There is a tradition that my ancestors brought it with them from across the sea many hundred years ago, when they were at war with some of your western tribes, who all wore such protection in battle.'

'It is beautifully made,' remarked Jack.

The Sheikh glanced down at his shirt of mail in unmistakable pride, and said,—

'Yes; it will turn either spear or sword; and I have the horse furniture to match.'

'I suppose you set very high value on your horses?' said Jack; 'you Arabs are famous for them, you know. No doubt yours are of some celebrated breed?'

'They are of the pure blood of the desert—the famous Nedgid race; swift as the wind, and tireless as the wolf. You English have no such horses as we own.'

'Oh, come, Sheikh; I like that,' retorted Jack Cuxwold, who could not stand this imputation on English horseflesh.

'Why, an English thoroughbred would

simply make the best you've got lie down, over either one mile or ten !'

The Sheikh shook his head incredulously.

'Bismillah !' he exclaimed ; 'you talk of what you know not. None of your English horses can match with the pure-born steeds of the desert.'

'Well, if I only had a good thoroughbred, here, Sheikh, I'd ask nothing better than to make a match with you.'

'Race with me ! It is a pity you cannot.'

Ben Israel's malicious story had spread amongst the Halawins, and the whole tribe, from the Sheikh downwards, believed that Jack was a great English noble. The Jew had told Mohammed Sebekh that his captive was a man of great consequence, chiefly out of spite because Cuxwold had refused to employ him in the negotiation of his ransom. Though he had disappeared after the murder, he had not left Cairo, and had made many inquiries about the two Eng-

lishmen, and had ascertained that Jack was what is vaguely termed in the East an English lord; and his rank and position he now purposely exaggerated, for the reason above stated. Of course Zelnè speedily became aware of this rumour, and it raised Jack still higher in her esteem. The chiefs of the desert place a high value on their descent, and think much of purity of race, both in themselves and their horses. A woman will always take an interest in a man whose life she has saved, and none the less because he happened to be young and good looking. The whole tribe now treated Jack with much consideration, and looked upon it that his rank in his own country warranted his associating with the Sheikh's daughter, so Jack and Zelnè were left a good deal to their own devices.

'Will my lord be very pleased when the time comes to return to his own people?'

'Naturally,' replied Jack. 'If you were among strangers, would you not

also be glad to return to the tents of the Halawins ?’

‘My lord is anxious to once more gaze upon his wives ?’ replied the girl.

‘Not altogether,’ rejoined Jack ; ‘considering I have none. Besides, Zelnè, we are not quite so liberal in these matters as you are. It is contrary to our custom and religion to have more than one wife.’

‘It is so with us sometimes,’ replied the girl, after a pause, ‘but our law allows more. Will you go back at once to your own country, or shall you still tarry in Egypt ? You see you were unable to save your great chief at Khartoum, and you will never conquer us Arabs.

‘I am not sure, Zelnè, that we much want to ; but though we may leave the Soudan, I don’t think we shall leave Egypt for some time.’

‘And will my lord ever come back to visit his friends in the desert ?’

‘It’s all very well, Zelnè. I owe you my life, and shall never forget it ; but your father is rather an expensive man

to pay a visit to ! He don't condescend to items, but he has put a pretty big price upon his hospitality.'

'Ah,' rejoined the girl, as a pained expression swept across her face, 'I wish it were not so. A short time back, and the stranger who sought our tents would have shared what he had ; and when he left us, we should have prayed Allah to speed him on his way. We had quarrels amongst ourselves, it is true, but it is you strangers who make all the mischief in our country.'

'How do you make that out ?' inquired Jack.

'You come into the Soudan, to which you had no right. The Egyptians pretend that they have conquered it, and you send pashas to lead them ; and then you interfere with our customs.'

'How so ?' asked Jack.

'We have made slaves from time immemorial. It is our custom — allowed by our religion. The negroes were born to be the slaves of the Arabs, and you say it shall not be so.'

Jack Cuxwold felt that it would be useless to argue the question of slavery with this proud Arab girl, who evidently believed that the negroes were a most inferior race, and that the kidnapping and selling of them was a lawful industry.

‘Yes,’ continued Zelnè, ‘you hinder us from making money, and that makes our sheikhs rapacious. I would it were not so. Father was not greedy of money once.’

Zelnè no doubt believed that she was speaking the honest truth about Mohammed Sebekh ; but the facts of the case were, that in those days she had been too young to be cognisant of his doings, the Sheikh having been a levier of black-mail from his youth up.

‘When shall we leave here?’ observed Jack, with a view to changing the subject.

‘In a few days now, I think. Some of our men brought in word last night that you English were on your way back to Korti.’

‘Then it seems,’ said Cuxwold, ‘that they will get back after all.’

'I don't know,' replied the girl. 'They are a long way from Korti yet. It is natural you should be glad your countrymen are safe. Shall you be very pleased to rejoin them?' and Zelnè gazed wistfully into his face, as she asked the question.

'Never mind talking about that, Zelnè, dear,' answered Jack, a little diplomatically, and thinking how fair a picture the girl made, in her silk-embroidered jacket, tunic-like skirt, and flowing trousers. 'I am not likely to leave you for some time.'

'It won't be very long,' said the girl, as she shook her head sadly. 'Father will be too anxious to get possession of your ransom, not to make an opportunity for you to communicate with your friends ere long.'

'And suppose he does,' replied Jack; 'even if my friends are willing to pay that money for me, it will take them some time to collect it.'

The girl laughed merrily.

'Do not mock your poor Zelnè. Such

a sum as that seems much to the poor Arab, but it is nothing to my lord, who owns many flocks and herds.'

'You are wrong, Zelnè,' replied Jack. 'I am not a rich man; but,' he said, drawing the girl nearer to him, 'I shall be very sorry to leave my preserver,—to say good-bye to the sweet girl who has lightened my captivity. I shall never forget you, Zelnè; and you will think of me sometimes, too, will you not?'

'I shall never forget my lord,' said the girl, weeping, and the dark eyes gazed up into his, brimming with love and devotion.

Of course he shouldn't have done it. He was more than half in love with a girl in England. He was laying the seeds of a sore heart for one to whom he owed a debt he could never repay. He was likely to involve himself in a great scrape, and, perchance, pay for his folly with his life, and yet Jack did what I suppose nineteen men out of twenty would have done,—clasped the Arab maiden in his arms, and pressed his lips passionately to hers.

CHAPTER X.

REPORTED MISSING.

THE telegrams from the Soudan were watched with feverish interest at Knightshayes. Was not the younger scion of the house in the thick of the fray? and after the fierce fighting round Suakim, in the previous year, no one doubted that the dash across the desert would be hotly contested. As is often the case, Jack Cuxwold was perhaps the best-loved son of his parents; and with his sisters, he certainly took higher rank in their affections than his elder brother. Jack's bright, good-tempered nature was more likely to ingratiate him with his fellows than the somewhat cynical disposition of Lord Dartee; and with women, Jack was in-

variably a favourite. Besides all this, with the Countess he held the claim of being her younger son ; and with the Earl, the invaluable recommendation of being not nearly so exacting in his demands for money as his brother. The news of Abu Klea was flashed across the wires with the sad tidings of how some of our best and bravest had met their doom. Then came the bloody struggle of Abu Kru, and the wires told how our men battled their way to the Nile. With anxious eyes and beating hearts the ladies at Knighthayes scanned the dreaded telegrams. No, hurrah ! Jack was all right so far ; his name was not among those terrible lists of killed and wounded. However, it wasn't all over yet. The column had got to go to Khartoum, and how that was to be accomplished, was by the main portion of the British public not in the least understood. Then came the intelligence that Khartoum had fallen, and that the indomitable Gordon was slain. Too late, too late ! and a wail went through the

country when it knew that the hero to save whom so many lives had been dauntlessly laid down, had perished.

With a feeling of relief, the nation learnt that Lord Wolseley had issued orders for the prompt return of the column to Korti, and with anxious eyes it looked for news that the backward march had been accomplished without further fighting. Gordon was dead ; let us have no more waste of life and money, and, in Heaven's name, let us wash our hands of the Soudan ! The electric wire reports the safe arrival of the column at Jakdul,—that there is no fear of further fighting, but ah ! there is a line at the bottom of the telegram, which blanches the Countess's cheek, and makes her heart stand still.

‘We regret to say that Captain Cuxwold, who started with despatches from Metammeh, on the night of the twentieth, has not since been heard of.’

She had flown with the paper to her husband, and, pointing to the telegram, said, in a low voice,—

‘What does it mean, Rank? Do you think he is killed?’

The Earl glanced at the paper for a moment, and then replied,—

‘It looks very bad, but we must hope for the best. I shall run up to town by the next train, and see if I can learn anything more at the War Office.’

Of all the terrible records of the battlefield that those to whom he is dear have to read, none, perhaps, is more heart-sickening, and carries more desolation of woe with it, than the dread return of ‘missing.’ If the loved one is amongst the killed, there’s nought to be done but weep o’er his memory. If he is amongst the wounded, a few weeks’ suspense, and it terminates in joy or sadness; but *missing*, alas! so often proves that hope deferred that maketh the heart so sorely sick,—most sorrowful of all, perhaps, when, despite weary waiting, the missing man’s fate is never ascertained.

Then the Countess in her misery sought Alec Flood, who was still staying at

Knightshayes. He was constantly apologising for the positively unreasonable length of his visit ; but not only was he an immense favourite with them all, and one, moreover, by no means easy to lay hands on, but I think that the Countess and her daughters had a tolerable inkling of what it was that induced the prolonged stay of this irreclaimable Bedouin.

Flood at once announced his intention of accompanying the Earl to town.

‘My dear Lady Ranksborow,’ he said, ‘Jack, you know, is the dearest friend I have, and I may be of use in this matter ; and, let the chance be ever so slight, I would not for the world miss it. You see I’ve wandered a good deal in the East, and have many acquaintances in those parts. I will telegraph to some of the traders I know on the Upper Nile. I have no doubt I shall get news of Jack sooner or later ; but remember, Countess, don’t be disheartened because we get no news for some weeks. Every week that passes, adds to the chance that he is alive,

though a prisoner. I know the Arabs well. If he was not killed on first falling into their hands, the probability is his life will be spared ; and if he was, we shall soon hear of it. That sort of news flies fast in the desert. Rely upon it, I will never rest till his fate is cleared up, even if I have to go to the Soudan for the purpose.'

But the papers were read at Temple Rising as well as at Knightshayes, and there was another face which, although the owner uttered never a word, turned almost as pale as the Countess's when she read that fatal telegram. No love words had ever been exchanged between Lucy and Jack Cuxwold, but he had made a very deep impression on her during the Cairo episode.

Then she had followed his career in the Soudan with the deepest interest, and, girl-like, had magnified his deeds there, and pictured him to herself as a very paladin. She was always leading on Alec Flood to talk about his friend, and Alec

had many a story to tell of Jack's readiness in resource, and *sang froid* in difficulties, which served to fan the flame. Love may be described as a passion which invariably leads the opposite sexes to invest each other with attributes which they neither of them possess. And though Jack was a very good specimen of the light-hearted dragoon, he would have been much amazed could he have known the pedestal upon which Lucy had placed him. Perhaps, could that young lady's vision have extended to the tents of the Hala-wins, her views might have undergone considerable modification. The whole family at Temple Rising were aware that Captain Cuxwold was among the missing, and knew that this must be a source of terrible trouble to the Knight-shayes people.

That, with the exception of Lucy, the Bramtons could feel much grievous anxiety about Jack Cuxwold's probable fate, could hardly be expected. They sympathised in the sorrow of the Ranksborow family, as

all kind-hearted people naturally would, and it was resolved, in a family council, that a note expressing that sympathy and their sincere hopes that intelligence of the missing man would shortly arrive, should be sent over to Knightshayes; Miss Bramton, as usual, undertaking to write it, for that young lady had gradually constituted herself the sole arbiter of social tactics at Temple Rising. True, Lucy asserted herself occasionally, and then her sister knew better than to oppose her, for, under her somewhat quiet exterior, Lucy carried a very resolute will of her own, and upon this occasion the girl chose to supplement Miss Bramton's highly-monogrammed epistle to the Countess, with a short note of her own addressed to Alec Flood.

The groom speedily returned, with a line of thanks from Lady Jane Cuxwold, on her mother's behalf, and an intimation that the Earl and Mr Flood had gone to town to ascertain what information the authorities really were in possession of. Two or three days passed, the Earl had

returned to Knightshayes, but it was known through the neighbourhood that he had brought back no consolation with him. Captain Cuxwold's fate was still a mystery. Lucy had received no reply to her note, but was aware that Flood had not returned with the Earl.

She was sitting alone in the drawing-room, one February afternoon, her mother and sister having driven in to Wroxeter for shopping purposes, when the butler threw open the door, and, a little to her surprise, announced 'Mr Flood.'

'Why, when did you get back?' she exclaimed, as she rose to greet him; 'and do you bring good news with you?'

Alec shook his head as he replied,—

'I only got back to Knightshayes last night, when I found your note, and I'm here to answer it in person. I lingered in London to push inquiries in every direction I could think of.'

'Is there no hope?' she inquired anxiously. And had it not been for the fading light of the winter afternoon, the

pallor of her cheeks must have attracted Flood's attention.

'Ah, yes,' he replied; 'pray don't think that. The authorities have told us all they know as yet; but we need not altogether despair. That Jack left with despatches; as the telegraph stated, is quite true, as it is also that he never arrived at Korti, nor has he ever been seen since; but then, on the other hand, there is no rumour whatever of a solitary British officer having been killed in the desert, and my own impression is that he is a prisoner in the hands of some roving band of Arabs.'

'Is his life safe, do you think?' asked Lucy, somewhat eagerly.

'Yes; if my surmise is true, I should say so. You see they can make money by holding him to ransom, and that will prove a safeguard to him.'

'You're a true friend to him, Mr Flood, and, I feel certain, if he is a captive, will leave no stone unturned to obtain his release. Yes,' she continued, interrupting

him, as he was about to speak, 'I know perfectly well that Lord Ranksborow will do all he can—one does not want to be long acquainted with the family, to see how very fond they all are of him—but the Earl does not understand the ways of the Arabs as you do. Humanly speaking, his trust is in you, and I think you would be true as steel to a comrade.'

'I hope so,' said Flood; 'not that there is very much credit in that. If your "pals" don't stand by you in a scrape, they're not of much account. I'm glad, though, you think that of me. I wonder whether I can make you believe something more.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the girl, with a rather forced hilarity, 'don't try my credulity too far.'

'It's not much strain upon a girl's belief, when a man speaks seriously to her upon one point.'

'No,' she interposed hurriedly; 'but there are things better left unsaid,—serious subjects better not touched upon.'

‘I can’t help that, Lucy,’ he replied. ‘I’m not an emotional man, but what I’ve got in my heart, I’m determined to say, although I must own you have given me scant encouragement. Lucy, I love you. I don’t want an answer now, but do you think you can ever love me well enough to be my wife?’

‘Oh, Mr Flood, how could you?’ cried the girl. ‘I like you so much, and I tried so hard to prevent your speaking. Yes, an answer you must have, and at once. It cannot be. I shall regard you always, if you will permit me, as one of my best and dearest friends, but I cannot be your wife.’

‘I am too late, I suppose,’ rejoined Flood sadly; ‘and yet I had thought that there was no one about here that you seemed to care about.’

‘Unfair, unfair,’ she cried. ‘You have no right to demand more than a frank and honest answer to your question. I esteem, and ever shall esteem, you highly; but it can never be, and I can only thank you for the compliment you have paid me.’

Flood rose to take his departure, and as he wished her good-bye, she put her hand frankly into his, and said, in low, earnest tones,—

‘Friends ever; is it not so?’

‘Yes,’ he rejoined, as he pressed her hand; ‘if it may be no better. Good-bye, and God bless you.’

Flood pondered over his defeat as he rode slowly home.

‘It is the first time I ever coveted a woman’s love,’ he muttered. ‘It’s the old story, I suppose. There are men born that ever hanker after the grapes beyond their reach, and that I am one of them; and yet I thought my chance a fair one, till I began to speak. Well, it is best I did. There’s nothing to be ashamed of in having honestly loved a girl like that. If she sees fit to change her mind, a woman can always easily let you know she has done so; but no, she is not that sort. She seemed to take a tremendous interest in poor Jack’s fate. I wonder—by heavens, I believe it is so! Can it be

that she has lost her heart to Jack Cuxwold? Now I remember, she never tires of talking about him. It's possible that in that short time at Cairo something passed between them. They saw a good deal of each other; but she has never mentioned having heard of him between then and meeting me at Newmarket. Ah well,' continued Alec Flood, with a grim smile, 'if Jack was first in the field, that would account for my defeat. I was a dullard not to have seen it, when she tried to prevent my having it out with her. She's straightforward and true, anyway. Time I cut all the western so-called civilisation and went back to the glorious dreamy life of the East, where telegrams and even newspapers are nearly unknown; where you are seldom pestered with letters, and never with conventional visitors. Yes, that girl was right. What had a vagrant like me to do with respectability and matrimony? Think I'll go back to Egypt, and find out what has become of dear old Jack.'

CHAPTER XI.

‘WHAT NONSENSE YOU TALK!’

THE Bramtons were regarded with somewhat mixed feelings by the Knightshayes family. Had it not been for his turf policy, it is highly probable that neither the Earl nor Lady Ranksborow would have endured the irreclaimable vulgarity of John Bramton and his wife for a moment; but when you knew them, they were such thoroughly good-hearted, hospitable people, that one was apt to condone their solecisms. As for Lord Dartree and his sisters, the *consigne* had gone forth that they were to be civil to the Bramtons. The eldest son of the house quite admitted the expediency of doing as his

father wished, but the Ladies Cuxwold were much exercised in their minds for the reason of taking up such people. They didn't so much mind Mr and Mrs Bramton, and they really had got quite fond of Lucy, but they most decidedly disliked Matilda. They did not deny but that she was a pretty, ladylike girl enough, but they thought she was a very pretentious one. Miss Bramton decidedly gave herself airs! Her parents were good-natured, honest vulgarians, but in her there was a certain amount of ingrained snobbishness, if I may be allowed the term with reference to a young lady. As for Lord Dartree, Miss Bramton amused him a good deal: his flirtation with her had progressed apace. Matilda Bramton was possessed of unbounded faith in her own attractions, and she coquetted boldly with both him and Sir Kenneth, and would have laughed to scorn any one who had presumed to tell her that the choice of her two admirers was not at her own discretion.

But though Miss Bramton had her own hands pretty full, she still had time to keep an eye upon what she was pleased to call her sister’s flirtations, and had more than once rallied Lucy about her *tendresse* for Mr Flood. When Lucy assured her that there was nothing in it,—that she and Alec Flood were good friends, and nothing more, Miss Bramton rejoined haughtily, ‘I should hope so.’

‘Mr Flood, my dear, is, of course, all very well to amuse yourself with, but I should hope, when it comes to seriously settling in life, that you can do better for yourself than that.’

Miss Bramton’s vanity utterly precluded the idea that any man could possibly presume to amuse himself at her expense, but she nevertheless held to her own opinion of Alec Flood being in genuine earnest as regards her sister, and, as we know, she was right.

‘It’s a great nuisance,’ said Miss Bramton, on her return from her drive, ‘this business of poor Captain Cuxwold.’

‘Well,’ replied Lucy hotly, ‘that is not the term exactly to apply to it. The poor fellow has given up his life, in all probability, as so many more of them have done out there.’

‘Ah! by the way, I forgot for the moment that you knew him, and that he was rather civil to you that time in Cairo. I’m sure I’m sorry enough for him, considering I never set eyes on him. What I mean is this, that it will terribly break up our party at Wroxeter Race Ball. I heard this afternoon that the Ranksborows, unless they have good news, have determined not to be present.’

‘I hadn’t thought of it before,’ rejoined Lucy; ‘but, of course, it’s not likely.’

‘It’s a great bore!’ exclaimed Matilda Bramton, as she threw herself into an arm-chair. ‘It will take away half the fun of the thing. Knightshayes was to have been full for the occasion, and they were coming in quite a strong party to Wroxeter. Now Lord Dartree tells me it is all knocked on the head.’

'You saw him to-day then?' said Lucy.

'Yes; he was in Wroxeter; and he also told me that if they had bad news about his brother, he should not even run his horse for the steeplechase. In fact, all the fun will be out of the thing. It is most unfortunate!'

Miss Bramton was not more selfish than her sisters generally, but when a death interferes with our amusements—I am talking, remember, of the death of a person of whom we have no personal knowledge—I think we are apt to feel more sorry for our own disappointment, than for the affliction of the relations, even though they be friends of our own.

'Well,' replied Lucy, 'we needn't go; and, if you don't think it will be pleasant, perhaps we had better not. It would be a graceful mark of sympathy to the Ranksborow family.'

'What nonsense you talk!' cried Miss Bramton pettishly. 'Of course we must go. It would never do for people of our position in the county to stay away upon

such an occasion. Because the Ranksborows can't go, it is just the more reason we must.'

This was just one of the speeches which Miss Bramton was in the habit of making, and which filled the breasts of the Ladies Cuxwold with mixed amusement and indignation. Eldest daughter of a *parvenu* of little more than a year's standing in the county, Miss Bramton was always vapouring about their county position. John Bramton posing as a sporting man moved them to laughter, but his daughter claiming the position of the ruined Molyneuxs, jarred terribly on their feelings.

For the next two or three days, telegrams came pretty thick to Knightshayes, for Alec Flood, and one morning at lunch-time he said calmly,—

'I am off to London to-morrow, Lady Ranksborow, and to Cairo the next day. I've just received a most lengthy telegram from the *Standard* office. While in London, I got them to allow me to telegraph to their correspondent in the Soudan,

to make all inquiries concerning poor Jack, and the return wire has just come to hand. It is so far satisfactory, that it confirms my hope that he is merely a prisoner. If that is so, his release is a question of money and arrangement. I’ve had a long talk with the Earl, and all that can be done about that in this country, we have settled between us.’

‘God bless you, Alec,’ said the Countess, as she pressed his hand. ‘It is very good of you to go ; but I know to serve any of us, and more especially Jack, we can always rely upon you.’

‘I shall ride over to Temple Rising, and say good-bye to them there this afternoon ; and to-morrow I’ll bid you all good-bye ; and when I see you again, God grant I shall bring back the stray sheep with me.’

The women pressed round him, and made much of him during that meal. As Alec said, ‘No man starting for a trip up the Mediterranean ever was made such a fuss with.’ They accompanied him

to the hall door even, when he went to get on his hat, and the Countess whispered in his ear, 'May good fortune attend you.' While Lady Emily murmured to her sister,—'If Lucy Bramton is such a fool as to say him no, she never deserves to be asked by a good fellow again.'

You see they all thought they knew what it was that took Alec Flood to Temple Rising, and little dreamt Alec had put his fate to the test some days before, and sadly regarded Lucy's decision as final.

'I must be pretty far gone,' he muttered, as he rode across the park, 'when all the women can see the state of the case. However, it's no use; if I have guessed aright, Lucy Bramton's heart is no longer in her own keeping. Well, if I can rescue my old chum from the hands of the Arabs, she'll owe me a debt of gratitude, and with that I must be perforce content. There's nothing like having some hard work before one to make one forget the disappointments of life, and it is possible I may have to wander about in the desert,

after the manner of the children of Israel, before I clear up poor Jack's fate.'

Upon his arrival at Temple Rising, Alec Flood was, of course, overwhelmed with questions on the subject of Captain Cuxwold. Had anything been heard of him? Was there any news whatever? The family were dreadfully cut up, of course. And then Miss Bramton could not help reverting to her old mournful cry, to wit, that it would be the ruin of the Wroxeter Ball, though the slightly contemptuous expression that swept for a moment across Flood's face, warned her not to continue in that strain. Then Flood briefly acquainted them that he had come to say good-bye, and that he was off to Cairo the next morning, with a view to discovering what had become of Jack Cuxwold. His adieux were soon made, though he detained Lucy's hand in his perhaps a little longer than was necessary. 'Remember, friends ever,' she said, in a low tone, and Alec bowed his head in silent assent.

A fortnight later, and he was once more standing in the verandah of Shepherd's Hotel, and wondering how best to prosecute his search. He had, of course, been, within a few hours of his arrival, to the military authorities, who regretted deeply that no intelligence of any kind had been received regarding Captain Cuxwold. Suddenly he became conscious that he was being watched by a little, slight, wiry man, whose piercing black eyes seemed riveted upon him. Flood returned the stare with interest, and in another minute or two recollection dawned upon him. 'The villainous gambling-house tout,' he muttered, 'who lured us off to his den, the night Dick Bramton was killed.'

In an instant he had strode across to the pillar against which the man was leaning, and said,—

'So, sir, we meet again. I have never set eyes on you since the night—'

'Hush!' interrupted the other deprecatingly. 'It was not my fault. I could not help the row. The Englishman, he

lose his money, he lose his temper. He call the other players liars, cheats. Ah! what wonder blows were struck; and in these parts men use the knife. I had to hide, or they would have put me in prison.'

'And a deuced good thing too,' rejoined Flood. 'You would have been where I've not the slightest doubt you deserved to be, and have often been before.'

'No, it was not me. I declare it was not me who struck the Englishman; but, bah! this is not business. I have something to tell you.'

'And think, perhaps, that I am going to be fool enough to accompany you into some confounded den or other to look at it.'

'No, Mr Flood.'

'Ah! you know my name; how is that?'

'I was dragoman to Sir John Kenyon, when you travelled up the Nile with him three or four years ago.'

'I thought I recollected your face last March!' exclaimed Flood; and then he

remembered that Kenyon had a dragoman of very doubtful honesty in his employ.

‘What would you give,’ asked Ben Israel, ‘to know where the Captain who was with you that time, is now? You pay well for that, eh?’

‘Do you mean to say that you know where Captain Cuxwold is?’ exclaimed Flood.

Ben Israel nodded.

‘You pay me well, I tell you. What you give?’

‘I will give you a ten-pound note now, and one hundred more, should your information prove true.’

‘Ah! it is too little. His friends would surely give more than that to know what is come of him.’

‘That is quite enough to pay you,’ replied Flood, ‘simply to learn the details of his murder.’

‘Ah! but he is not dead; he is alive. What you pay to know where he is now?’

‘I will give you ten pounds, and two hundred if your information prove correct.’

‘It is too little,’ replied Ben Israel, shaking his head. ‘He is alive ; I saw him three weeks ago.’

‘I’ll give you no more,’ rejoined Flood. ‘If he really is alive, I shall speedily get information from some other source. In the meantime, you had best remember the *kurbash* is not altogether abolished.’

Ben Israel, though he had a very great regard for his own hide, was not much influenced by this threat. He knew that the English now ruled in Cairo, and that the use of the *kurbash* was much restricted. But what did bear upon his mind was Flood’s suggestion that he might get his information from other sources. His cupidity was struggling with the too probable realisation of that coming to pass. He knew Mohammed Sebekh far too well to suppose that he would not endeavour ‘to realise his prisoner’ as soon as possible. If he did not snatch at this opportunity, he would very possibly obtain nothing, and the man had been consistent through life

in endeavouring to fill his own pockets at the expense of his neighbours.

‘Well, sir,’ said the ex-dragoman, ‘it’s very little for such news as I bring you ; but I must take it,’ and the man held out his hand.

Flood took a note-case from the breast-pocket of his coat, and, producing an English ten-pound note, put it into Ben Israel’s hand, saying, as he did so,—

‘There ; the two hundred pounds shall be paid you here, personally, or at any address you may name, as soon as I have ascertained that your information is correct.’

‘Good!’ replied the other. ‘That is the address to which please pay the money. The Captain is in the hands of the Halawin tribe of the Bagarra Arabs.’

‘What is the name of their sheikh? and where shall I find them?’

‘Mohammed Sebekh. And they will most likely be now somewhere between Korti and Berber.’

'And his life, I presume, is quite safe in their hands?'

'*Chut!*' rejoined Ben Israel, with a rapid gesture of his hands. 'Mohammed looks to selling him his liberty. He loves money.'

'Ah! I understand,' said Flood; 'he holds Cuxwold up for ransom.'

'Yes! Cunning old fox, Mohammed! He will want a deal of money for the Captain.'

'That's a matter that doesn't concern you,' said Flood sharply. 'If your information prove correct, you will have the remainder of your money;' and then, with a short nod of dismissal, he turned on his heel and walked into the hotel.

'Two things to be settled at once,' thought Flood. 'First, to telegraph to Knightshayes that Jack is all safe, though a prisoner; and, secondly, whether I had better make my way to Suakim or Korti.'

CHAPTER XII.

MR NOEL LAYS LONG ODDS.

IT is close upon the verge of the racing season. Already the acceptances are out for the Lincolnshire Handicap and the Grand National, and speculation on both events is spirited and heavy. The Derby, too, comes in for a fair share of attention at intervals. Notably is there a strong disposition to lay against the favourite; and yet those connected with him declare that Damocles has wintered well. M James Noel is still a persistent opponent of that noble animal; indeed his brethren of the ring vow he must be in possession of some exclusive information, to bet against him in the way he does. The

Earl of Ranksborow, albeit well used to battling with the bookmakers, and well known as an impassive loser, begins to wear a harassed expression. The Earl not only had never stood to win so large a stake as he did over this Derby, but the landing of it had never before been of so dire a necessity. In good truth, the Earl was most desperately pressed for money, and, as he brooded over the state of his affairs in his own den, began to think he should share the fate of his friend Molyneux, and that the broad lands of Knightshayes would come to the hammer. He had received Flood's telegram, which had spread great joy through the house of Ranksborow; but Lord Ranksborow grimly reflected that Jack was held to ransom. Flood, before leaving, had warned him that that would probably be the case, and, further, that the sum named would be probably very considerable; *what*, of course, the Earl did not know, but he *did* know that it was most difficult to find money to carry

on with, and that this supplementary sum would be something like the proverbial last straw. True, Flood, who was perfectly aware of his host's embarrassments, had offered, in the most delicate way, to assist in making up whatever might be required ; but of course Alec Flood would have to be repaid, and how that was to be managed he couldn't for the life of him see. If this *coup* would only come off, then he should pull through ; but he mused sadly,—‘What man ever threw in who called “a main,” with his back metaphorically to the wall?’ And now Damocles, just as speculation had begun again, was travelling very badly in the market. He had written to Stubber, and received a reply that there was nothing whatever wrong with the colt. He had written to Mr Skinner, and that gentleman had written word that he could not account for the hostility displayed towards the favourite, unless it was the introduction of Lucifer into the betting, and a prevalent idea that Damocles was liable

to change hands at any moment. Then, again, the Earl wondered what this backing of Lucifer might portend. Stubber had never said anything to him about that colt. Could it be that he had any pretensions to be a racehorse of the first class? True, he had won that race at Newmarket in the autumn in a canter; but then his antagonists had been of very moderate calibre! Pooh! it was all nonsense. It was not likely that they had another colt in the stable pretty near as good as Damocles! But if Lord Ranksborow was puzzled at the backing of Lucifer, the trainer was infinitely more perplexed. Stubber, with the exception of Mr Skinner, had confided to no one the secret of what a good colt this was. He had taken especial pains, when he tried him, to prevent the result of that trial leaking out. Now he and that worthy had arranged that the way to make most money out of these two colts, was to reserve Lucifer for the St Leger. Mr Stubber quite intended to thoroughly do

his duty by his employer, but as Mr Bramton did not bet, he argued that, as long as he won both the Derby and Leger, it could not matter to him with which horses he won them; and, as the commissioner had pointed out, that arrangement would be most conducive to their joint interests. The trainer was kept in a state of perpetual fidget by his employer. As he confided to sympathetic friends,—

‘There’s no knowing where to have this Mr Bramton. When you trains for a gentleman as *owns* he knows nothing about it, why, of course, the best thing he can do, and the thing he ought to do, is to leave it all to the trainer. But this Mr Bramton, he’s taking to shoving his oar in! I never get up in the morning without feeling that maybe the ’osses will have left my stable before night. He’s always talking of selling them, and though in his last letter he said he had made up his mind to keep Damocles, it’s my belief he don’t know his own mind three days together. Well, there’s one comfort, who-

ever is backing Lucifer, will burn his fingers, if things are left to me.'

Could either Lord Ranksborow or Mr Stubber have been present at an interview that took place in one of the numerous lodgings at Newmarket, towards the close of the Houghton week, things would have been all perfectly plain to them. Sim Napper had come up there, in obedience to a message from his uncle, Mr James Noel, who, as he expressed it, 'wished to have a talk with him.'

'Now, Sim,' said the bookmaker, 'I look upon you as my agent here, and I'm bound to say you keep me pretty well posted. What news you send is reliable, and not merely hearsay! Now I've no doubt that Damocles is the best of his year, and that he will win at Epsom next May, if all goes well with him. Now, that would never suit my book, as things stand at present. I'll pay for it, but remember I must have very accurate information of all that goes on in Stubber's stable!'

‘I’ll do my best, Uncle James ; but remember,’ he added meaningly, ‘I can’t prevent Damocles winning the Derby.’

‘No,’ replied the bookmaker ; ‘I’m not likely to ask you to do that. Anything of that sort is very awkward to be mixed up in ! But, if I’m not very much mistaken, they’ve got another pretty good colt in that stable, in Lucifer. I don’t for an instant suppose he is as good as the crack, but he’s good enough to serve my turn. What I mean is this : sometime during the winter these two horses must change places in the betting market. If anything happened to Damocles, that confined him to his box for a few days, it would go a good way to assist my plans !’ and here Mr James Noel looked excessively hard at his nephew. ‘Luck stands to us at times, in these things,’ he continued. ‘A careless stable-boy leaves a window open at night, and horses catch cold.’

‘Well !’ rejoined Mr Napper, ‘I can only hope luck will befriend you. I can promise you one thing, I’ll do my best to keep you

accurately informed of the doings of Stubber's horses ; by which I presume you mean Damocles and Lucifer.'

Mr Noel nodded.

'It will cost you *some* money, but not so very much. If I can, I'll get hold of the boy who looks after one or other of them.'

'All right!' said Mr Noel. 'I can trust all that and other arrangements to you. I don't wish the horse any harm ; and it would be like my luck, they are all so beastly healthy when I bet against them. *Why, I'll lay you five hundred pounds to ten that Damocles hasn't even a temporary ailment between this and next May.*'

'Well!' said Mr Napper, laughing, 'you can put that down. It's never fifty to one against anything or anybody catching cold during a winter and spring at Newmarket.'

'Now there's nothing,' said Mr Noel, 'like turning a thing like this over from every point of view. If I want Damocles

to go back in the betting,—to be what we call pretty near “knocked out,” it might also suit me to pull the strings the other way later on, and put pressure upon Mr Bramton to ensure his starting. Now you lawyer chaps are ‘cute. Can that will business we know of be brought to bear in any way?’

‘Wait a bit till I think it out,’ rejoined Mr Napper, and for some minutes there was a dead silence between them. At last Sim Napper opened his lips and said,—‘It’s not very much of a chance, and remember, it’s a mere matter of bounce. There’s a young fellow here who claims to be a legitimate son of Richard Bramton. Son he may be, but I fancy he can’t prove his mother’s marriage. Well, you could certainly let Bramton know, before the race, that his not running Damocles would be regarded as a violation of the conditions of the will, and that this young fellow, as heir-at-law, would then dispute it. You are giving him a friendly tip, mind. I could arrange everything with Tom Robbins easy

enough ; but it all depends upon what sort of chap this Bramton is. If he's a nervous, timid sort, when he found you knew all about the will, he'd sooner run the horse than chance a lawsuit. If, on the other hand, he is a cool, business-like fellow, he'll tell you to go to the devil, and that he shall do as he pleases. Legally, I don't think you've a leg to stand on, even if Tom Robbins could prove his mother's marriage. It all depends on what sort of a man Bramton is.'

'I haven't an idea,' replied Mr Noel. 'All I ever heard about him was that he knew nothing of racing ; but Stubber, or whoever manages for him, hasn't much to learn.'

'Perhaps you could find out,' said Mr Napper. 'It all depends upon that. As I said before, my idea is a mere game of bounce.'

'Quite so, my boy,' rejoined Mr Noel quietly ; 'and I landed the biggest stake I ever won by bounce. It was in this way. I had backed a horse for the Chester Cup

to win me a raker, and, about a week before the race, found the owner and his friends hadn't a piece on. The horse was "put up" at Tattersall's, that is "what will any one take about him for the race?" There was not a bid. The owner was present, and I suddenly thundered out,— "Ten monkeys to one he don't start." The owner shot me at once, and I had the best race I ever had; but if it hadn't been for that bit of bounce on my part, the horse would never have seen Chester.'

'I suppose you stand to lose a lot of money over Damocles?' said Mr Napper.

'Not near so much as you might suppose. It's true I laid twenty thousand to three hundred against him as a yearling, but then I laid the same against a great many more. I haven't got round, but I shouldn't be hit very heavily. No; if Damocles was stopped in his work for a few days—if we can get up a bit of a scare so as to drive him to an outside price in the market, then I should back him, and it

would very likely suit me better that he should win than lose.'

'I understand,' said Mr Napper; 'and I tell you, Uncle James, he will win if he keeps well. I will keep a sharp look-out on Lucifer; but, though no doubt he's a nice colt, depend upon it he's not so good as the favourite.'

'Perhaps not; still he might prove a good second string, if anything happened to the favourite; and, as you say, Newmarket is a terribly catch-cold place,' and here Mr Noel winkled pleasantly at his precious nephew.

The conflicting interests that surround the favourite for a big race are always somewhat difficult to reconcile, and yet it did seem at present as if it might be fairly to the interest of every one concerned that Damocles should win the Derby. Mr Bramton, his nominal owner, desires the colt to win, on account of the social importance that will accrue to him, John Bramton. Lucy, his real owner, wishes him to win, for the honour and glory of the thing, and

also because she knows it was the dying desire of her dead uncle. Lord Ranksborrow hopes for Damocles' success, as offering the one possible hope of extrication from the quagmire of financial difficulties in which he is floundering. Stubber, the trainer, is looking forward to both fame in his calling and profit from the victory. Even Mr Noel could be content to see the colt triumphant, if only he could be driven to a long price in the betting market for two or three weeks ; but that *if*, when you interfere with the natural course of events, and take steps to bring it about, may be fraught with circumstances beyond human control.

Mr Skinner, still brooding over that to him puzzling problem as to whose prompting it was that Mr Bramton owed the inspiration of keeping Lucifer, watches the turf market like a cat, and takes speedy cognisance of Mr Noel's operations therein. Thoroughly initiated in all the mysteries of bulling and bearing on the great turf exchange of Tattersall's, and being further

in the confidence of Mr Stubber, the well-known commissioner is somewhat staggered at the determined hostility shown to Damocles by Mr Noel and the little clique of bookmakers of whom he is the guiding spirit. He knows the colt is well, and, as all the racing world knows, on his two-year-old form ought to be hailed winner of the Blue Ribbon. He knows Mr Noel and his following already stand to lose heavily by his success. What can they be going on? On what ground do they still steadfastly oppose Damocles for the Derby? 'Everything comes to him who knows how to wait,' is a maxim especially applicable to the unravelling of turf mysteries, and a past master of those mysteries like Mr Skinner felt little doubt that the cause of this persistent 'bearing' of the favourite would be made manifest to him before long. It was not that he stood to win any large stake over the race on his own account at present, but he knew what it meant to the Earl of Ranksborow, and for past favours he was anxious to pull his first patron

through, if possible. Add to which, he saw his way into making a very good thing out of the Epsom race and the St Leger.

Mr Skinner, therefore, at present is keeping a vigilant eye upon Mr Noel, whom, by the way, he cordially dislikes, and his proceedings.

CHAPTER XIII.

LORD DARTREE'S MISTAKE.

THE Bramtons were all unfeignedly glad when Lord Dartree brought the news of his brother's safety to Temple Rising. Lucy thanked Heaven that a life which had grown strangely dear to her had been, so far, mercifully spared, while as for Matilda, she was thankful that it was so, because she thought that now the Ranksborows might be regarded as sure to attend the Wroxeter ball, and Miss Bramton had made up her mind that was to eventuate in a great social triumph on her part. She pictured herself the belle of socially the crack party in the room. She had had a ball dress made expressly for the occasion, which, as she

said, 'was a very dream of loveliness.' She knew that in the matter of good looks she outshone the Ladies Cuxwold, and though there were people who regarded Lucy as the prettier of the two sisters, they were in a minority, and with that minority Matilda Bramton by no means agreed. Mr Bramton was glad that his neighbour had been spared a severe domestic affliction, but his relations with Lord Ranksborow had been a little strained at their last interview, and Mr Bramton had never forgotten that, in his own vernacular, the Earl had tried to 'best' him about the purchase of Damocles.

'Well, Lord Dartree,' exclaimed Miss Matilda, when she was made acquainted with Captain Cuxwold's comparative safety, 'now you have such much better accounts from the Soudan, of course we shall see you and your party at the Wroxeter ball. Your brother's exchange as a prisoner is, I presume, a mere matter of a few weeks or so.'

‘Sorry to say it’s not quite such plain sailing as you think, Miss Bramton. You see, these Arabs are not exactly civilised enemies. They don’t often make prisoners, and, when they do, they don’t part with them except for a stiffish ransom.’

‘Mere brigands,’ said Lucy, in low, earnest tones, ‘and like the Greek or Italian bandits, capable of proceeding to extremities if their rapacity is not speedily gratified. Oh, it’s too horrible! Remember the massacre of Marathon.’

‘For Heaven’s sake, Miss Lucy, don’t suggest such a thing—at all events, don’t put such a parallel into the head of my mother or sisters. The business is bad enough, goodness knows, but Alec Flood seems to think Jack is in no danger, although he makes no disguise about his release costing us dear.’

‘I don’t want to be a prophetess of ill-omen,’ rejoined Lucy, ‘but recollect there’s a ways terrible danger to the captives in those cases. The wretches in whose hands they are, wax impatient if their cupidity is

not promptly satisfied, or get suspicious of being surrounded and made to pay the penalty of their brigandage.'

'Quite so,' replied Lord Dartree; 'but this is not exactly a case in point. We are *at war* with the Arabs of the Soudan. They are not given to the making of prisoners, but, when they do, to hold them to ransom has been their custom from time immemorial. Alec told us all this before he started—'

'Just so,' interrupted Miss Bramton; 'and I have no doubt we shall hear of Captain Cuxwold's release before a month is over! Lucy always takes the darkest possible view of everything. So, Lord Dartree, unless you have bad news between this and then, you must promise me to come to the ball.'

'If you wish it,' rejoined Dartree, with an admiring glance at the girl's handsome face, 'why, it becomes a command.'

'Of course I wish it,' answered Miss Bramton promptly, with a coquettish flash of her somewhat bold black eyes.

‘And you will promise me plenty of dances?’

‘You shall write your name down on my programme for anything in reason,’ rejoined Miss Bramton, as she flashed another look at him.’

‘No man could resist such temptation!’ cried Lord Dartree gaily; ‘and, providing there’s no bad news of Jack, it’s a match.’

‘What! without my consent?’ exclaimed John Bramton, who at that moment entered the room. ‘Pooh, my lord, you must have bless you my *children*, and all that sort of thing. But I suppose you and Matilda have got to some of your sporting nonsense; but I say, gals, lunch should be about ready, and his lordship no doubt will come in and peck a bit. Just ring, Lucy, will you?’

‘Papa is simply incorrigible,’ murmured Miss Bramton to herself.

‘What an irreclaimable vulgarian,’ thought Dartree, as he rejoined,—‘Very good of you, Mr Bramton. I shall be only too delighted to—to peck a bit.’

Lucy's eyes flashed, and Matilda's cheeks flushed scarlet. Neither of them were blind to the covert sneer contained in Lord Dartree's acceptance of their father's invitation. It was rarely that nobleman indulged in his naturally sarcastic nature at the expense of John Bramton. He was quite aware that it was much to the interest of himself as well as his father to keep on terms of intimacy with the Temple Rising people, and he was too shrewd a man of the world not to see that the young ladies were very sensitive about the solecisms of their father, and disposed—especially Lucy—to resent any ridicule vehemently ; but nature is difficult to control, and Lord Dartree, though he did his best, was unable always to control his sarcastic tongue. He had never quite got on with Lucy, although the interest she took in his brother had prepared her to like him ; but Lucy never could get over a vague feeling that he was laughing at them, and we none of us like people who produce that impression. His open ad-

miration for Matilda so gratified the girl's vanity, that, quick-witted as she was, she had not formed that idea of him ; but she was no more blind than her sister, when Lord Dartree allowed his mocking tongue to get the better of him.

‘ Well, Mr Bramton, you must be almost sick of being asked the question, but how is Damocles ? ’ asked Lord Dartree, when they had got into the dining-room.

‘ Oh, he's first-rate. By the way, I wish you'd tell your noble father I've thought over what he said, and have determined to keep the horse.’

‘ Ah ! he will be very glad to hear that,’ said Lord Dartree, ‘ as he has an interest in Damocles winning. He mentioned that a very shady lot were trying to buy him from you.’

‘ When do you expect to hear again from Mr Flood ? ’ inquired Lucy.

‘ Difficult to say. Of course, by post we can't hear for some time, but Alec will telegraph as soon as he has anything to communicate. It was great news he sent

us, but he has got to get up into the Soudan before he can put himself into communication with these Halawin Arabs, in whose hands Jack is. It ought not to be difficult then, because I take it these fellows are as anxious to get our money into their hands, as we are to get poor Jack out of theirs.'

'Just so! just so!' said Mr Bramton; 'that's a maxim as governs all trade. People who want to buy, and people who want to sell, are sure to come together and do business; it's only a question of terms.'

'Hardly!' exclaimed Lucy. 'I'm sure Lord Dartree will echo my words, when I say there can be no making terms about Captain Cuxwold's life.'

'Quite right, Miss Lucy. We must pay whatever they choose to ask us; and come by the money how best we can.'

'As far as we can judge by the papers, everything will be speedily over out there,' observed Miss Bramton. 'The expedition has failed, and I suppose there is nothing left for us to do but to come away again.'

Why, we may have Captain Cuxwold home in time for the Wroxeter ball after all.'

'I'm afraid you are a little too sanguine,' rejoined Lord Dartree, smiling, 'but I do hope that we may hear everything has been arranged for his release before that. And now, Mr Bramton, I must be off. You, in common with most of our neighbours, have sympathised with us so kindly in our trouble, that I thought I would ride over myself and let you know of our good news.'

'Very good of you indeed,' chorussed the whole party. 'I'm sure we were most anxious to hear;' to which Lucy, as she said 'good-bye,' added, 'And the next time you hear from Mr Flood, you will let us know at once, won't you?'

Lord Dartree, of course, promised to comply with her request, and as he rode down the drive thought to himself,—'I wonder if there is anything between that girl and Alec Flood! I'm blest if I don't think that she's engaged to him.'

It may seem odd that Lord Dartree did not accompany Flood on his mission in search of Jack Cuxwold, and it was no want of brotherly affection that caused him to abstain from doing so ; but Lord Dartree was a Guardsman, although he has figured but little in his military capacity in these pages, and the War Office had been rather overdone of late in the matter of applications for service in, or leave to go to, the Soudan. The feeling was strong amongst the officers in the army to be employed in the expedition for the rescue of Gordon, and, failing that, to be allowed to go out as a volunteer. The military authorities are bound to check such enthusiasm, and to consider that as soon as they have what they consider the requisite number of men and officers for the work to be done, the surplus simply represent an unemployed contingent, that require transport and feeding. That Lord Dartree would have obtained leave to go to Egypt in search of his brother, there was little doubt, but it would have involved some little delay, and,

as Alec Flood pointed out, that was not to be thought of.

‘No official, no general, likes to make himself responsible for a large sum of money in these democratic days, and that is what we shall have to do, if Jack’s a prisoner. No, Dart, you’d be no good to me in the East, and, believe me, I’d best be off at once. You can, very likely, be of use here, and you can’t there. If Jack’s alive, you can trust me to do all man can for him.’

So it was settled that Flood should go alone to the East, with what results we have already seen.

Lord Ranksborow was highly elated when his son gave him Mr Bramton’s message.

‘By Jove, Dart, upon my soul, I think it will come off!’ he exclaimed, after dinner, as he raised a bumper of claret to his lips. ‘As the old turf refrain has it—

“Here’s the big stake we never yet landed,
Here’s hoping we’ll do it this time.”

Do you know what this means to me?’

‘Attaining the very garden of Bende-
mere,’ rejoined his son, laughing; ‘a grati-
fying of the hopes and fears of number-
less worthy people, whose patience has
been probably tried to its utmost limit.’

‘It means landing eighty thousand
pounds,’ rejoined Lord Ranksborow.
‘And you yourself — you’ll do pretty
well, eh?’

‘I should win twenty thousand pounds,’
rejoined Lord Dartree, ‘and could afford
then to cut racing, and turn respectable.’

‘I suppose you’ll win the Wroxeter Hunt
Steeplechase the end of next month?’

‘Yes; I think so; but there won’t be
much money to make out of it.’

‘Yes, it will take clever financing to
knock a thousand out of it, I suppose,’
rejoined the Earl, and then they both
relapsed into silence.

No one knew better the wondrous un-
certainty of racing than Lord Ranksborow.
He had seen the horse that carried his for-
tunes knocked over at Tattenham Corner;
he had known the flyer he had backed for

the Hunt Cup reach Ascot only to cough, instead of race; he had seen 'the good thing' he was on for the Cambridgeshire, hopelessly shut in at the critical moment. No one of the dire casualties of the race-course but what he had endured personal experience of; but it did look this time as if Fortune meant to shine upon him. All the antecedents of Damocles quite justified the supposition that he was considerably superior to anything of his year. The colt had wintered well, and his trainer was full of confidence; and now his owner, as Lord Ranksborow believed, had dispelled the one cloud that dimmed that gallant animal's horizon, by declaring that he would not part with him, at all events before the Derby. Only three months now to the great race, and the colt never was better. The Earl might well feel sanguine, and he was of that disposition. Despite years of experience of the many equine maladies that three months may unfold, Lord Ranksborow fell to building 'castles in the air,' and indulged himself in that

most glorious of all gambling fallacies, to wit, resolving how you will spend your money, before you have even won it.

‘I think, Matilda,’ said Lucy Bramton, when she found herself alone with her sister on the day of Lord Dartree’s visit, ‘it is incumbent on you to give your admirer a lesson in good manners. He was downright impertinent to papa to-day.’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Bramton, ‘it was rude of him, no doubt ; but papa is—well, you know what papa is.’

‘Not so polished as he might be, no doubt,’ rejoined Lucy, ‘but I am not going to stand his being laughed at before me, by Lord Dartree or any one else.’

‘You are making an unnecessary fuss about a trifle,’ retorted Miss Bramton. ‘I admit Lord Dartree was somewhat impertinent in the way he accepted papa’s extremely vulgarly given invitation to lunch ; but it’s the first time I have ever noticed such a thing, or you may be sure I should have called him to order long ago.’

‘I can only say, Matilda, I have, two or three times. Lord Dartree strikes me as a man who exercises considerable repression on himself, to prevent making constant fun of dear papa. He’s more your affair than mine, but if he commits himself again, and you don’t put him down, I shall.’

‘My dear Lucy,’ replied Miss Bramton loftily, ‘you need not distress yourself about upholding the dignity of the family. You can’t suppose I would allow papa to be made a subject of ridicule? I shall be perfectly competent to put down Lord Dartree, should it become necessary. He is rather given to badinage, and is, perhaps, at times tempted to go too far. You, on the other hand, are absurdly sensitive. Don’t you disturb yourself, my dear; I am quite equal to the situation.’

‘Very well,’ rejoined Lucy; ‘I don’t want to interfere; but bear in mind, Matilda, no one shall laugh at papa before me.’

CHAPTER XIV.

ENGLISH HORSES *VERSUS* ARABS.

THE Halawin Arabs lingered still at the Bayuda Wells, and Jack Cuxwold was puzzled as to Mohammed Sebekh's motive in so doing. That the Sheikh was a regular trimmer, Jack had no doubt, but if he had not taken part against the English, as yet, he surely could hardly intend to do so now. Some of Mohammed's followers were daily away scouting, and from their reports the Sheikh was at length convinced that the British column would be permitted to retreat unmolested. The Mahdi had captured Khartoum, and slain the famous English pasha, who had so long defied him therein ; and his troops, after

the rough handling they had received of late, had no stomach for further fighting. In short, as the English were apparently evacuating the country, it was deemed inexpedient to interfere with the infidel dogs further, nor to hinder their going. Mohammed Sebekh, now he saw which way the game was going, was clearly not likely to commit himself. He could, if he chose, pose as 'friendly,' and whatever the English chiefs might really think concerning him, it was not likely that they would treat him as otherwise. His intention now was to strike across the desert to Jakdul, as soon as he had ascertained that the English had left it, and then, pushing on to the Wells of Howeiyat, the nearest water to Korti, from thence negotiate for the ransom of his prisoner.

If Jack did not understand all this at the time, yet he did the greater part of it. He quite guessed that the Sheikh only tarried to see which way the wind blew, and that as soon as he was convinced it was not to his interest to take part in the fray,

that he would be speedily anxious to have that matter of his, Jack Cuxwold's, ransom settled and done with. In the meantime, Mohammed Sebekh was very fond of conversing with his prisoner, and one question with which the twain had much discussion and argument, was upon the supremacy of the English or Arab horses. Mohammed, as might have been expected, stoutly upheld the superiority of the steeds of the desert, while Jack Cuxwold laughed at the idea of any Arab horse that ever was foaled holding his own with a moderate English thoroughbred.

‘Why, Sheikh,’ he exclaimed, on one of these occasions, ‘we have horses in our camp that would carry two men, and leave you, and the best horse you own, far behind in a race of two or three miles over the desert.’

‘I have heard,’ answered Mohammed, ‘that you English are very proud of your breed of horses,—that you vaunt they can outstrip the wind,—that you have a tradition amongst you, that years ago you had a

famous steed that could gallop a mile in one minute, but such English horses as I have seen, I am sure could not do that. They are big, but they are not of pure blood. We Arabs think more of blood than of size, both in man and horse. It's the blood tells when the strain comes.'

'Quite so ; but you have never seen an English thoroughbred horse. The few you have seen, have only been half-bred horses. We preserve the blood of our highly-bred horses as jealously as you do.'

'The blood of the Nedgid Arabs has run unstained in their veins for centuries,' rejoined Mohammed proudly.

'Well, if it comes to that,' rejoined Jack, rather nettled, 'we can trace the pedigree of our racers back for a couple of hundred years, and I fancy our stud-book is more rigidly kept than yours.'

'What do you mean by a stud-book ?' asked Mohammed.

Jack Cuxwold then proceeded to explain to the Sheikh that the birth of every thoroughbred horse in England, as well as

the name of the sire and dam, were registered in a volume kept by people appointed for that purpose.

Mohammed listened to this explanation with a face of polite incredulity, and at the finish of it, stroked his beard, and exclaimed,—‘It is very wonderful!’

This was only a sample of many conversations of the same kind that passed between Mohammed and his prisoner. The Sheikh, indeed, though evidently extremely sceptical, seemed never to weary of the subject, and showed Jack the pick of his own stable—if I may use the term to horses who had no experience of such a building—with as much pride as the famous Kings-clerc trainer was wont to throw open the door of Ormond’s box; and they were horses to be proud of. Pure-bred Arabs, and looking it all over; small, like all Arab horses, but the fineness of the skin, through which the veins could be clearly traced; the lean, thoroughbred head, with its bold, open nostril, and large, soft eyes, all spoke to the purity of their descent. The

Sheikh's curiosity to see one of these English thoroughbreds grew apace. He sounded Jack upon the subject, and even hinted that it would be a delicate attention on the part of his guest—as he was most scrupulous about regarding Jack—to present him with one before he left, pointing out that to an English ‘my lord’—such as Captain Cuxwold was in his own country—five thousand pounds was a very paltry sum to demand for saving his life and keeping him out of harm's way during such dangerous times as they had just passed through. Then, seeing that Jack did not altogether receive this proposition with enthusiasm, he suggested that if the Englishman could procure from his friends such a horse as he described, it would be a graceful courtesy at parting if they should exchange horses; and then the wily old horse-coper bethought him of one of his stud, well stricken in years, that would do admirably as a parting gift for Jack Cuxwold.

That gallant dragoon was beginning to

wish most devoutly that the days of his captivity were numbered. His position was getting exceedingly awkward. He had nothing to do in camp, and in great measure it fell to Zelnè to entertain him. What was he to do? He was perpetually sauntering about with a maiden who made no disguise of her love for him. He had lost his head about the girl once, and there was nothing for it now but to go on love-making. Yet when the time of his release came, it would be impossible for him to take her away with him. ‘Fancy the explosion there would be at Knightshayes if he turned up with such an appanage as this Arab maiden!’ He certainly was not prepared to turn Mahometan, be adopted into the tribe of the Halawins, and pass the remainder of his life in the desert; and yet he remembered remorsefully that Zelnè had saved his life. It was not his fault altogether—he could hardly help it, but he had returned that boon, by stealing her heart. He was not more punctilious in his loves than men of his class generally, holding

that women, as a rule, could take pretty good care of themselves, and that it behoved a soldier to accept his *bonnes fortunes* as they came to him ; but this was different. He could not wrong this girl, to whom he owed his very existence ; and yet he had, as he knew, unwittingly done so in some measure.

‘ They’re so deuced inflammable in these tropical climates,’ he muttered ; ‘ and when a girl with such glorious eyes as Zelnè looks up into one’s face, and lets it be seen that she’s spoons on a fellow, what is he to do but kiss her ? There is but one way out of the scrape. It sounds rather mean, but the best thing for both of us would be if I could make a clean bolt of it. Not so easy, though. I am apparently under no restraint, but unless I am with Zelnè, my friends here keep a pretty sharp eye on me.’

Here his meditations were interrupted by the maiden in question, who said archly,—

‘ My lord looks grave. Is it that he is tired of his long stay by the Wells of Bayuda ? ’

‘ No, Zelnè dearest, it is not that ; but I am not, like you, used to the monotony of the desert.’

‘ Monotony ! What ! the desert, with its ever-changing shadows, with its pure air, its glorious nights ! It’s very little I have seen of towns, but they seemed so close, confused, so pitiful, after the free expanse of the desert.’

‘ But we are about to leave this, Zelnè ; is it not so ? Even you Arabs will admit that it is the wandering life you lead constitutes the great charm of the desert.’

‘ Yes ; it is rarely we stay so long in one place as we have here. This is out of the regular routes, and my father cared not to be mixed up with all the fighting. He is no believer in the Mahdi, but would never range himself under your flag. The desert belongs to her children,’ concluded Zelnè proudly.

‘ As I told you before,’ rejoined Jack, ‘ we English make no claim to the Soudan. We came to rescue our great chief, who was shut up in Khartoum. We have failed

—he is dead. We have no further quarrel with your people.'

'I am glad to hear you say that,' replied Zelnè. 'Your tribe in England, they don't live in tents as we do. Your climate is too cold for that. I suppose you have one great castle, and huts, and sheds round, for your dependants and cattle?'

'Something of that kind, Zelnè,' returned Jack, smiling as he thought of Knight-shayes.

'Yes; and you think much of your breed of horses,' continued the girl, 'and even believe, my father tells me, that they could outstrip the famous breed that has been in our house for centuries.'

'Would go a monkey on the match!' ejaculated Jack. 'I mean—I haven't the slightest doubt of it.'

'I should like to see one of these horses of the wind,' whispered Zelnè.

'And so you shall, darling, as quickly as I can lay my hands on one. It is difficult now, while I am a prisoner.'

'Ah! but you will not be that much

longer. We leave here to-morrow for the Wells of Jakdul. Is my lord glad ?'

'Am I not a prisoner for life to your bright eyes, my sweet Zelnè ?' rejoined Jack, developing an unexpected and most injudicious turn for Eastern hyperbole; but, as he remarked afterwards, 'there is no doing this sort of thing by halves.'

'My father will want to speak to you this afternoon. He will wish you to get ready the letter you must send to Korti; he is very anxious to see one of these famous horses that can gallop down the steeds of the Halawins.'

'There may not be a horse of the race I mean at Korti, but if there is, the eyes of yourself and your father shall be gratified, Zelnè. Now, I must go and get this letter ready.'

The girl sighed as she walked away towards her own tent, and said to herself, 'He loves me, but, ah ! not as I love him. I could give up my father, my people, the desert life I love so well, and cling to him; but men are different. They will not re-

nounce their creed and country for the love of woman.'

Jack sat down as he proposed, to write to the Colonel of his regiment, and inform him of his situation,—how that he was a prisoner in the hands of the Arabs, and that Mohammed Sebekh demanded five thousand pounds to set him free. 'If that is not forthcoming, the said Sheikh threatens to carry me off with him into the wilds of the Soudan. Whether it is possible to raise the money I must leave for you and others to determine, but I see no possibility of extricating myself from my present scrape otherwise. A small party would run no risk in coming out to confer with Mohammed Sebekh, but to come out in force, would only be a signal for the Halawins to disappear in the desert. My family will, of course, repay what money may be advanced for me.'

When he had got that far, Jack thought he would go to the Sheikh's tent, and read it to him. Mohammed listened to him attentively, and when he had finished said,—

‘It is good. My lord’s ransom will be doubtless soon ready, but he has said nothing about the horse.’

‘No,’ replied Jack; ‘I am going to write another letter about that,’ and suddenly an idea flashed through his brain, that he determined was worth working out.

Returning to his tent, he sat down and composed another epistle, this time to his subaltern Checquers. That young gentleman he knew to be as cool and quick-witted as any one in the force. He had to be careful as to what he said, as it was quite possible there was some one amongst the tribe who could read English. Zelnè, for instance, spoke it a little, and, for all he knew to the contrary, read it. He could only trust that Checquers might be able to read between the lines.

‘DEAR CHECQUERS,’ he wrote,—‘The Colonel will tell you that I have fallen into the hands of the Philistines, that they have put a price upon my head, and have appraised your noble captain considerably

higher than he has ever been valued as yet. My *host*, Sheikh Mohammed Sebekh, possesses crude ideas on the matter of horse flesh, and persistently maintains that an Arab steed can outrun an English thoroughbred. It would *facilitate* my release if I could convince him that he is wrong. He will doubtless expect a present at parting, in addition to his tribute. If you can pick up a fair thoroughbred horse, send him out. Is The Bantam—the horse that won the Khedive's cup at Cairo last spring—anywhere about Korti? If so, tell his owner he may put his own price on him, but that I want him for a special purpose. Love to every one.—Yours ever,

JACK CUXWOLD.'

'There,' said Jack, as he folded the epistle, 'that's as plain as I dare make it. If Checquers can't understand *I've a game on*, I can't help it!'

CHAPTER XV.

‘THE MUMMER.’

EARLY the next morning the camp was astir, tents were struck, camels were loaded, and all the preparations for the march made, with that rapidity and facility to which dwellers in tents get so soon habituated. Jack rode apparently, though unarmed, perfectly free in the midst of the band, but they had taken very good care not to mount him on his own dromedary, nor had he any reason to believe that his host had by any means picked out the best horse in the stable for his riding. However, the Halawins moved rapidly, and, though it was a long way, with the exception of two halts, and those of short dura-

tion, the Arabs never drew bridle till they reached the Wells of Jakdul. There the tents were once more pitched, and it was evident that a somewhat prolonged halt was intended. Mohammed Sebekh indeed informed Jack that he should remain there twenty-four hours, but that as soon as they were rested, two of his young men should carry Jack's letter into Korti, and that he and his tribe would then proceed to the Wells of Howeyat, to await the English General's answer to his demand.

Jack slept soundly that night, and, as he idled about by the Wells the next morning, congratulated himself upon one thing,—if anything should come of the daring scheme that he had conceived, he had, at all events, achieved one great point,—he was no longer lost, he was on the known desert route, and could find his way to Korti; could he but escape, he was no longer astray as to the road he had to travel; add to which, when they reached the Wells of Howeyat, he would be still nearer,—in short, within one long day's

ride of his old comrades. He was sanguine that Checquers would understand his note ; but the great difficulty lay in this : Was The Bantam forthcoming, or was it possible for Checquers to find him such a horse as he required ? If he could get an English thoroughbred, Jack felt that it depended solely on his own dexterity and horsemanship to laugh at Mohammed Sebekh's beard ; but it was useless to attempt to escape, unless he felt pretty sure he was on a good horse.

‘Five thousand pounds,’ he muttered, ‘is worth risking my skin for. If my scheme succeeds, I shall save my ransom, and what, upon my word, I regard almost as much, I shall avoid saying farewell to Zelnè.’

Great was the excitement amongst his old comrades when Jack's letter arrived at Korti. They had long given him up for lost, and supposed that he had the mischance to fall in with a small party of wandering Arabs somewhere between Metammeh and Jakdul, and that his

bones were now, like those of many others, bleaching amid the sands of the Soudan.

'Hurrah!' cried Checquers, when the Colonel handed him his note. 'Why, Jack's alive, and not only alive, but very much alive. I don't know what he says to you, sir, but he's at the old game again, as I read his letter, and he's got a match on with the venerable old robber into whose hands he has fallen. The English horse against the Arab, catch weights, owners up.'

'Let me see your letter, Checquers,' returned the Colonel. 'This Mohammed Sebekh, to whom he is paying this involuntary visit, is determined not to part with him until he gets five thousand pounds. Of course it has got to be paid, but it has to be raised first. Whether they could spare such a sum from the military chest, and whether Lord Wolseley would authorise it if they could, is doubtful; and it will take some little time to arrange otherwise. I have no doubt the Earl of Ranksborow, as Cuxwold says, will repay it, but it will take weeks before he could remit the money.'

I must go and take counsel with the authorities.'

'One moment, sir,' said Checquers. 'Under any circumstances, we must temporise; is it not so?'

'Certainly,' rejoined the Colonel.

'Very well, sir. If I understand Jack Cuxwold—and I know my dear old skipper pretty well—he sees his way into fooling old Mohammed some. I know the sort of horse he wants. One that can gallop, stay, and is pretty fit. Jack means the winning-post of that race to be Korti. Now, he and I, as you know, are always mad about garrison races, regimental matches, etc. We always know in whose hands every *race-horse* in the army is. All the fighting has rather disturbed the diffusion of such useful knowledge, but I think I know where to lay hands on The Bantam.'

'You young robber,' rejoined his chief, laughing; 'I believe you dream of matches with 7 lbs. in hand.'

'If The Bantam is only fit, he's the very horse for Jack's business,' rejoined

Checquers ; 'and Tom Donaldson, to help Jack *do* an Arab, in a match of £5000 a-side—for that's what it amounts to—would let him have him, I'm sure. Temporise a week or two, sir. Give me time to get The Bantam, and give him a gallop or two, and I only wish I'd a monkey on the match, and a photograph of old Mohammed's face, when Jack leaves him at the winning-post, and, feigning he can't pull his horse up, gallops straight into Korti.'

'You're a sanguine young man,' rejoined the Colonel ; 'however, there's never any harm in having two strings to one's bow. You see about your mission, and I'll see about mine. We must, of course, send an answer of some sort at once to the Wells of Howeyat, where Mohammed Sebekh is waiting our reply.'

The Sheikh carried out his intentions, and, after twenty-four hours' halt at Jakdul, pushed on to the Wells of Howeyat. He had his spies and scouts close around, and even at Korti, so as to have speedy intelligence of any contemplated expedition

against himself and his tribe. But the authorities there had no such intention. There were but two ways, they thought, to rescue Jack Cuxwold—either by money or by stratagem. They were quite aware that the Halawins were a powerful and well-armed tribe, who were supposed to have taken a prominent part in the massacre of Hicks' army two years before; and to attack them with any hope of success, would require a considerable force,—not such a column as had been despatched to Metammeh, but still a force of some strength. If Cuxwold could escape by strategy, they could but provide him with the horse he asked for: the rest must be his own doing. As for the money, that would take some few days to arrange. A diplomatic answer was accordingly sent to Mohammed Sebekh, to the effect that the money would be sent to him as soon as it could be collected, while it was further intimated that if an English horse could be procured, it would also be forwarded, to enable Captain Cuxwold to make a suit-

able *nuzzer* to his host. Accompanying this missive, was a note from Checquers, which ran as follows,—

‘DEAR JACK,—We are all awfully glad to hear that you’ve turned up, though what happened to you exactly puzzles us extremely. The chief has told you all about the money arrangements, but the horse is my business. I can’t get hold of The Bantam, and he has got a doubtful leg, even if I could, but I’ve got my eye on the very horse you want, and am going to send him to you in a few days. I don’t think you ever saw The Mummer, by Adventurer out of Footlights. He’s a rare stayer, very fit, and I think just the horse you want. I fancy his long raking stride will smash up the best Arab that ever was foaled.—Ever yours,

JIM CHECQUERS.’

‘P.S.—I should like to stand some of your money on the match.’

Jack laughed when he read his sub’s

letter. It was quite evident that Checquers thoroughly took in the whole scheme ; indeed, the idea commended itself not a little to that dare-devil young gentleman, and Jack felt that he could confidently rely upon Checquers sending such a horse as he wanted. The next thing was to communicate the contents of these letters to Mohammed, who, with Eastern gravity, was waiting till it should please his guest to speak.

Jack first read him out his Colonel's letter, and, commenting upon it, said,—

‘ You see, O Sheikh, that such a large sum as this must take some little time to collect. This war has impoverished us English. The sum is large, and you must grant a few days' delay.’

‘ It is just,’ replied Mohammed. ‘ I and my people will tarry for a week by the Wells of Howeiyat ; but there is no mention of the horse.’

The desire to possess an English horse had seized upon Mohammed's mind very strongly, and Jack saw that he might as

well make a virtue of necessity, and present it to the chief, unless he succeeded in escaping on it, as it was quite clear to him that the Sheikh would never allow him to take the horse away with him, pay in every pound of the sum demanded as his ransom though he might.

'Now,' thought Jack, 'is my time to chaff old Front de Bœuf into a match. Brag, I must brag—there's nothing like brag. He don't believe a word I say about English thoroughbreds, and, though he is too polite to say so, thinks me a most stupendous liar.'

'This other letter is about the horse, Sheikh. One of my friends writes confidently that he will be able to send me a pure-bred English horse in a few days, and laughs at the idea of there being an Arab horse capable of contending with him.'

'It is not always the cock that crows the loudest that wins the battle. The ass is more noisy than the horse, but he is neither so swift nor so strong, for all that.'

'By Jove!' muttered Jack, 'I'm not to

have all the chaff my own side. Old Front de Bœuf seems a "nailer" at it, in his own way.'

'Well,' he replied at length, 'we English are very confident of the superiority of our horses, and beautiful and high-bred as I admit yours are, I still maintain they would have no chance whatever with a pure-bred English horse.'

'We shall see—we shall try.'

'Then, Sheikh, before I leave you, you will run a race with me—you on the best horse you own, I riding that my friend has sent me, for five miles. Will that suit you?'

'Not quite,' replied Mohammed. 'I will run you five miles out, and five miles home again.'

'What an old leg it is!' thought Jack to himself. 'Upon my soul, before he had been a year at Newmarket, I believe he'd hold his own with the best of them. He knows this much about English horses, that they are big and long striding. Of course, that turn round the post at the end of the five miles is all against the long-

striding English thoroughbred, whilst the little handy Arab would gain an advantage of many lengths as he slips round. However, it won't be the pull he thinks.'

'All right, Sheikh,' he said; 'I shall beat you, either five miles or ten—it don't matter which.'

'So be it; we shall see,' rejoined the imperturbable Mohammed.

During the next few days, Zelnè was in a great state of mind. She knew the negotiations for the release of her lover were going on,—that they were only awaiting their successful conclusion in their present encampment,—that a few days more and she would have said 'good-bye' to the man whose life she had saved, and learned to love, probably for ever. It was very bitter, but she knew that it must be so. She would have fled with him, or to him, and even given up the wild desert life, which was as the breath of her nostrils, to live amongst aliens and cities, if he had but held up his finger. But she knew he would not do so. She felt that he loved her

in a way, but with no such wild, passionate love as she craved from him,—a love that could give up everthing for her sake. There had been such men, she had heard. Was there not the legend of some great prince who gave up the empire of the world for the love of Egypt's great queen? But, she was fain to confess, she had never known one of these men. She had, of course, heard of the match between her father and his guest, and was as incredulous as Mohammed himself, in the first instance; but latterly she had begun to change her opinion. Her lover had assured her that the English horse would prove triumphant; and what will not a woman believe when her lover tells her a thing is so? She was in a state of feverish unrest. Was not the one romance of her young life about to terminate miserably? Ransom? There was little doubt about that: these English had so much money. Ah, how she wished her father had not demanded that! Was he not hers?—her captive, whose very life she had saved?

—and it was pitiful of Mohammed Sebekh to demand salvage for complying with the mere laws of humanity, she felt. Her captive!—what mockery!—a captive she was powerless to hold in bondage in the sole way she cared for. Her captive, alas! Shame on her that it was so, but she was his. Well, she must steel her heart to the inevitable. There could be no union between the infidel and the true believer. Why not? There was a Paradise for the Christian as well as the Moslem, but for the Mahommedan woman, there was no hereafter, so what need it matter? She might be his leman, for the matter of that; and then Zelnè sobbed herself to sleep, still wondering by what mischance she stumbled on the dying Englishman in the desert. It was her kismet, but it was none the less hard to bear.

CHAPTER XVI.

CHAFFED INTO A MATCH.

A FEW days later, and a small detachment of dragoons, from Korti—not above half a score troopers—under a non-commissioned officer, ride into the camp of the Halawins, bringing with them a carefully-sheeted quadruped, which it is at once whispered about amongst the tribe is the pure-bred English horse that is destined to compete with the desert-born horses of their Sheikh. Not an Arab amongst them but believes this race to be but the craze of the mad Englishman who has fallen into their hands. But, if they were sceptical before, they broke into derisive laughter when, at the desire of Mohammed, The Mummer was

stripped for inspection. In good truth he was not a taking horse, with his plain head, lop ears—which, to an English racing man, would have told of the Melbourne strain in his blood—and slightly Roman nose. His great ragged hips, and thighs let low down, might have attracted the attention of an expert in racing matters, but it assuredly required some credulity to believe that The Mummer was clean bred. Nobody, not even his greatest admirers, not even those who had more than once won their money over him, could call him a handsome horse. There he stood, a great, leathering bright bay of sixteen hands, quiet as a sheep, and with apparently about as much go in him. He was aged, and, only two or three years ago, at Lichfield, a prominent member of the Ring, on The Mummer being pointed out to him as a probable winner of the Queen's Plate, exclaimed,—‘What! that exaggerated old clothes-horse win. Rubbish! Here's six monkeys, The Mummer, or any part of it.’ *But he paid.*

To say Jack Cuxwold was impressed with

his horse, would hardly express his feelings. His first ejaculation was, 'What an old scarecrow!' but then he called to mind some rather redoubtable performances of The Mummer, of which, though he had not witnessed them, he had read. Then it flashed across him that if ever there was an English horse calculated to throw dust in the eyes of the Halawins, it was this one. Then he reflected that his astute subaltern was the last man in the world to make a mistake about such a matter; and finally came from the non-commissioned officer in charge of the party, a whisper, in Checquers' well-known tones,—

'It's all right, Jack. If he's a rum un to look at, he's also a rum un to go.'

But now, strange to say, another most unforeseen difficulty sprang up, and this was, that, after looking the English horse over, Mohammed Sebekh was furious.

'This your boasted breed!' he said. 'You laugh at my beard. You bring that thing into the desert which is as much like a camel as a horse. Go to! To bring out

one of the pure Nedjid line to contend against a mere beast of burthen like that, would be to be laughed at by my whole tribe.'

'You must do as you like, Sheikh,' rejoined Jack curtly. 'In my country, we claim forfeit for a match, when a man's *afraid* to run. That under-sized camel, as you call him, will beat any four-footed beast in your tents, if you have the courage to run against him.'

This, as was intended, only made the Shiekh still more angry.

'Beware how far you go. Look to it, Englishman, that you make not Mohammed Sebekh a laughing-stock in front of his tribe. An Arab brooks not insult, and loves revenge dearer than gold.'

'Pleasant this,' thought Jack, 'if I happen to make a mess of it.'

'If to beat you in a race, Sheikh, is to spit upon your beard, you had best not run,' he said aloud, somewhat contemptuously.

'I shall race with you, Englishman,' replied Mohammed, 'and if I find your boasted

steed to be no quicker than a donkey, on your head be it.'

'Ask for three days' delay,' said Checquers ; but, low as the tone was, it reached Mohammed's ears.

'What is it he says ?' asked the Sheikh.

'He advises me to ask for three days' grace. You can see why. My horse has travelled far ; he wants that much rest, before he is called upon to contend against the fleetest horses of the desert.'

'It is just,' replied Mohammed. 'On the third day from this, we will see whether your mouth has spoken the thing that is, or whether it is the mere boasting of a braggart.'

Jack Cuxwold simply bowed his head in sign of assent, and then proceeded to see after the requirements of Checquers and his men. But he speedily perceived he was jealously watched, and that it would be imprudent to indulge in talk with his subaltern. The Arabs were evidently suspicious, and it was necessary for his scheme to lull those suspicions to sleep, as far as

possible. Chequers, on his part, was quick to apprehend the situation, and made not the slightest attempt to converse with his Captain. He felt pretty certain that he thoroughly understood Jack's scheme. He knew that to aid him further than he had done was nearly impossible, and determined that, after his men had been fed and enjoyed a few hours' good sleep, the best thing he could do was to return to Korti, and await the result of the race.

As he bade Jack good-bye the next morning, he saluted punctiliously, in accordance with his assumed rank, and said,—‘I hope and think you will win, sir ;’ and, dropping his tone, he added, ‘*Help half-way.*’

Closely as the Arabs watched over the departure of the dragoons—and there were purposely one or two amongst them with some knowledge of English—those three last words escaped their vigilant ears ; and as Checquers and his troopers disappeared in the distance, Jack felt that, though an eye was kept upon his movements, he was no longer under strict supervision.

The next day Jack demanded Moham-med's permission to exercise The Mummer, and give him a gallop. The Sheikh admitted the fairness of the request, agreeing with Jack that horses required plenty of healthy exercise to keep them in good condition. The Arabs are horse-dealers by nature, and there was much curiosity amidst the tribe to see the Englishman's horse gallop; but Jack very soon found that the direction in which that gallop was to be, was carefully marked out for him, and that small parties of mounted horsemen were stationed here and there, carelessly, as if to see how The Mummer went when extended, but, at the same time, in such manner that one party or another would be able to intercept him, should he be rash enough to attempt an escape. This did not look very promising, he thought, for his scheme. If he was thus guarded on the day of the race, it would be almost madness to put it into execution. However, he had made up his mind about one thing, and that was not to expose his horse until the actual day came.

The Halawins, therefore, to their great disgust, were treated to nothing but a long, slow gallop, quickened a little during the last mile or so, but giving no idea of what the horse's actual powers might be. But that gallop had taught Jack something, and that was that The Mummer was a powerful, lazy horse, quite content to lob along, unless called on.

Zelnè had ridden out to see how the English horse went, but she, like all her tribe, knew that no idea of what The Mummer could do was to be gathered from what they had seen. Accustomed to 'bucket' their own horses unmercifully, except on long journeys, the Arabs could not understand a long, slow training gallop. Their idea was that the first impulse of the Englishman would be to try this new horse, which was confessedly unknown to him. That was what any one of themselves would have done. They would first have endeavoured to form some estimate of his fleetness, and, secondly, of his bottom. Surely the Englishman could not be so mad

as to think he could wear their horses down at that pace? Yet, unless his horse could go but a little quicker, why did he hesitate to put him to his speed? The consensus of opinion amongst the Halawins was that this English paragon was an immensely over-estimated animal. And they came finally to the conclusion that if it was not all braggadocio that the English possessed such wonderful horses, then had the English lord been grossly imposed upon; and some of the elders of the tribe smiled, as they remembered how often they had sold inferior horses as the pure-bred steeds of the desert. Zelnè alone, of all her tribe, believed in the powers of The Mummer. She watched her lover closely during these two days; he was kinder and more devoted to her than ever, but she noticed that he was sad and pre-occupied. That they must part, he made no disguise, though he refused to admit that it was never to meet again; but she knew better—she did not deceive herself upon that point. It is hard to blind the keen eyes of affection, and Zelnè by this knew every

trick of his countenance,—could interpret every smile or shadow that crossed his face. Mercifully, till the finish comes to all of us, we rarely realise in this world how often we are fated to say ‘good-bye,’ for ever!

The next day, Jack again rode The Mummer, and once more did the tribe turn out to see the performance. It was a mere repetition of the day before, except in one particular. As Jack commenced the last mile of his gallop, a well-mounted young Arab suddenly conceived the idea of, in racing parlance, ‘getting a line,’ by bustling The Mummer up a bit. No sooner did this brilliant thought strike him, than he put spurs to his horse, dashed alongside of Jack, and commenced a race with him. Jack apparently fell into the trap, and, laughing in his sleeve, determined to show the Arab one of the tricks of English jockeyship. He affected to bustle his horse. He got up his hand, and administered two or three decided cuts with the whip—to his boot; but it was all of no use. The Mummer quickened his pace not an iota; he fell further and further

behind, and, finally, the Arab dashed his horse triumphantly past the assumed winning-post, at least a dozen lengths in advance.

Screams, yells of delight, burst from the throats of the Halawins, as they witnessed the success of their own champion, though, as Jack said to Mr Checquers afterwards, when describing the pseudo trial, 'Such a shameless bit of "kidding" would have ensured my being hooted off the course at Stockbridge or Croydon.' But the niceties of jockeyship are as yet not understood in the Soudan, keen horse-copers though the Arabs of that region for the most part are. That the incident was duly reported to Mohammed Sebekh, was matter of course, and once more was that fiery chieftain roused to wrath. His was a singularly composite character. He had all the rapacity and fearlessness of a Front de Bœuf, conjoined with the cunning and avarice of old Trapbois. A schemer, intriguer, and liar, he feared but one thing, and that was the being made ridiculous. We writhe under

that even in the West, but, to the grave, dignified Eastern, to be laughed at is a great humiliation,—a thing, as a matter of policy, too, not to be endured. An Arab sheikh who once becomes an object of derision, it is likely will not remain chief of his tribe much longer; and Mohammed, from what he heard, had a strong idea that Jack Cuxwold was jesting with him, and, as I have said, they have a scant appreciation of humour in the East.

Once more did Mohammed send for his prisoner, and haughtily menace him with the consequences of making him a laughing-stock in the face of the assembled Hala-wins, and again did Jack taunt the Sheikh with wanting to back out of the match, and declare that, if he refused to run, he, Cuxwold, was entitled to claim the best horse the Sheikh possessed. No such condition as this had been made, but when aggravation is the main object we have in view, veracity becomes a very minor consideration. Stung by his prisoner's jibes, once more did Mohammed Sebekh vow that the

match should stand, but that it did so at his, Cuxwold's, peril.

‘I’m quite aware of that,’ thought Jack, as he walked away from the Sheikh’s tent. ‘If it comes off, your temper won’t be heavenly—but that won’t matter; and if it don’t, well, I don’t think you’ll cut off your nose to spite your face, or lose five thousand pounds to indulge in the luxury of cutting my head off. No, I don’t run half the risk I’ve done a score of times of late, to say nothing of never having had anything like such a stake on it.’

At this moment he encountered Zelnè and, despite himself, the smile with which he was picturing Mohammed’s rage at finding himself outwitted, faded from his countenance, and his face fell. This was the terrible trouble of his situation. He not only had a strong affection for the girl, but he most conscientiously recognised that he owed his life to her to boot. He had not sought, in the first instance, to win her affections, but when he found that she was won,—that she was wildly in love with the

man she had saved, what could he do but swim with the stream? How it was all to end, had troubled him not a little. To make her his wife was an impossibility, even had he wished it, and to carry her off under any other condition, was to repay all he owed her by the basest ingratitude, albeit he knew Eastern women do not attach so much importance to the marriage service as their sisters of the West.

‘My lord looks sad,’ said Zelnè. ‘Is he afraid of the result of to-morrow’s race?’

‘No, Zelnè dearest. I feel as confident of winning as ever, in spite of the apparent beating I received to-day.’

‘It was as I thought, you did not wish to beat my countryman; but to-morrow, I know it will be different.’

‘I think so. I feel sure that you have none of you any idea what an English horse can do, when he is ridden in earnest.’

‘Ah, dearest, I know you so well. I can see the finish of to-morrow’s race. You are about to leave me. Will you grant me a favour?’

‘Anything I can do for you, Zelnè, you know I will,’ replied Jack.

‘It is not much. Will you swear to carry this note that I have written, about you to-morrow, and not to read it or open it till the race is over?’

‘Certainly, Zelnè. But what can you mean? What is it?’

‘A charm—an amulet, perhaps; who knows? We believe in such things. I may wish you to beat my father, and in my little way would arm you for the contest. Will you swear?’

‘Yes,’ said Jack, as he took the note. ‘I swear not to read it till after the race.’

‘That is good of you,’ said Zelnè. ‘Now, kiss me, darling, and good-night.’

A fond embrace, and the lovers parted. Jack Cuxwold went to his tent more remorseful than ever at the love-passages which had passed between himself and this Arab maiden.

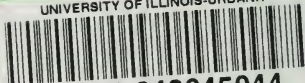
END OF VOL. II.







UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 042045044

